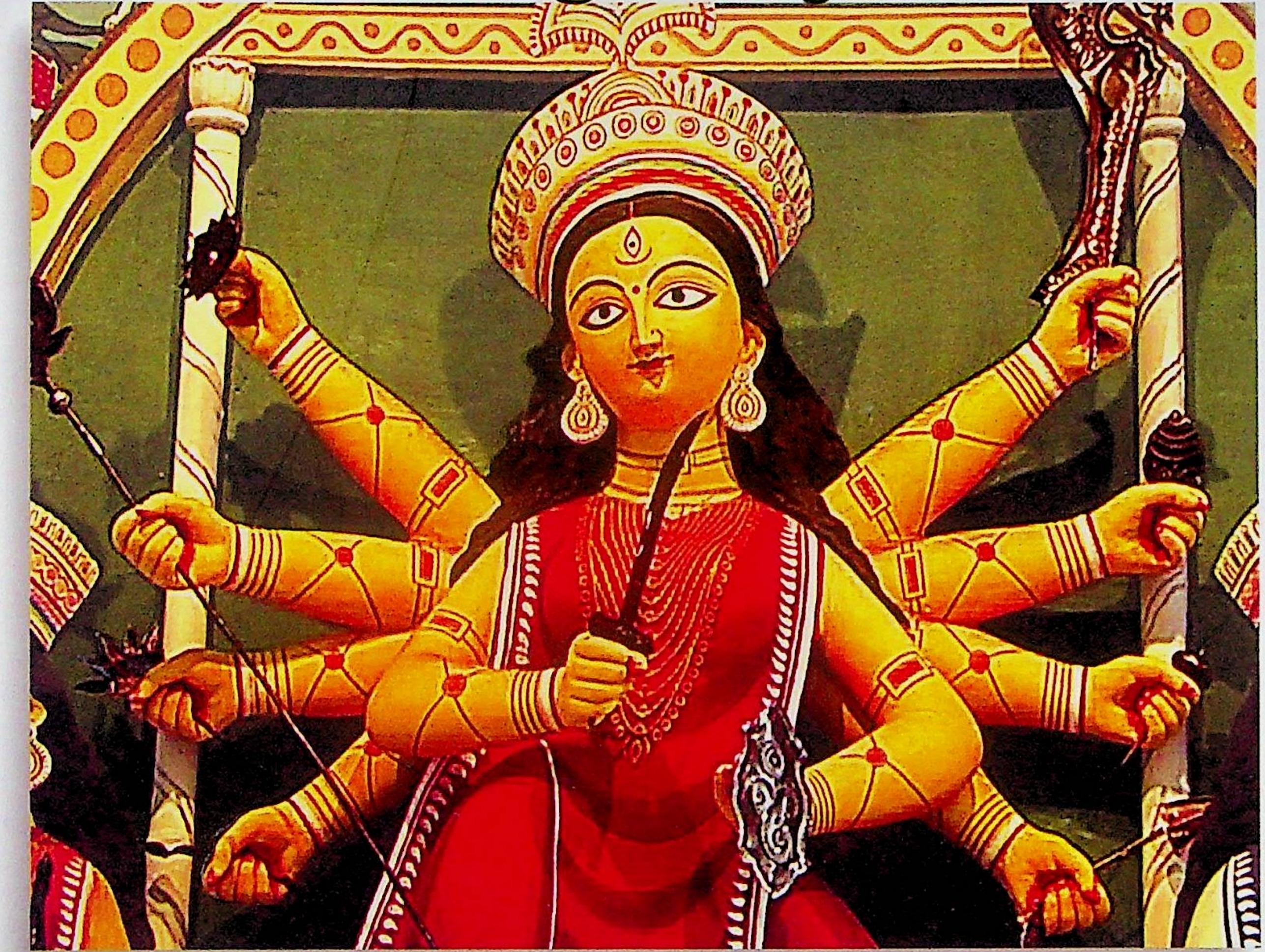
A Fascinating Festivity

Durga Puja



Photographs

SUNIL K. DUTT

A journey through Durga Puja

Durga puja is the festival of festivals for greater Bengal - West Bengal, Bangladesh and beyond. Wherever Bengalis lives on this planet...irrespective of caste, creed and religion, Durga Puja is the most popular cultural festival. Ace lensman **Sunil K. Dutt** has captured moments of such celebrations in his inimitable style. This wonderful album of photographs is truly a collectors' item

Goutam Ghose

••स्कैन्ड/Scanned••

190

A Fascinating Festivity

Durga Puja

Photographs:
SUNIL K. DUTT

Assisted by:
ASHOKE PAUL

Text
SHYAMAL KANTI CHAKRAVARTI

ALCHEMY

My impression of the fascinating festival

The incessant rain and deep dark cloud of the monsoon season sometimes create a feeling of depression even without any reason. At the end of this season comes the much awaited time - Autumn. The whole sky suddenly becomes brilliantly blue along with glorious, refreshing and dramatic clouds. The pleasant ambience has a soothing impact on the minds of the people. This beautiful weather after the nagging rain brings a great relief. In no-time the mind of the people changes for a bright, beautiful and brilliant days.

This charming season in Bengali is called "Sarat". Rabindranath in profound praise of this sweet "Sarat" wrote several songs and poems. Some examples are

আজি শরৎ তপনে প্রভাতস্বপনে কী জানি পরানে কী যে চায়।

"Aaje sarat tapane pravat swapane ki jani paran ki je chaya."

This means -

This autumn sun, this dream like morning - I know not what my heart desired today.

ওরে, যাব না আজ ঘরেরে ভাই, যাব না আজ ঘরে।
ওরে, আকাশ ভেঙে বাহিরকে আজ নেব রে লুট করে ॥
যেন জোয়ার - জলে ফেনার রাশি বাতাসে আজ ছুটছে হাসি।
আজ বিনা কাজে বাজিয়ে বাঁশি কাটবে সকল বেলা॥

"Ore, jabo na aaj ghare re bhai, jabo na aaj ghare

Ore, akash bhenge bahir ke aaj nebo re loot kore.

Jeno joaar jale fenar rashi batase aaj chhutchhe hasi

Aaj bina Kaje bajee banshi katbe sakol bela."

This means -

I won't go home to day, my friend.

I would break the barrier of the sky

itself, and would loot the outer world.

Laughter is running around, as if the

Surf of the tide-water. The day would

go by with indefinite intention:

only piping of flute.

এযে ঘাসের কোলে আলোর ভাষা আকাশ - হতে - ভেসে - আসা।
এযে মাটির কোল মানিক - খসা হাসি রাশি ॥

" E je ghaser kole aalor bhasha akash - hote - bhese - aasa
E je matir kole manik - khasa hasi rashi."

This means -

It is the language of light from luminous sky, in the lap of lustrous grasses green, it is the lavish laughter of a precious jewel lying on the ground.

What a great tribute to this stimulating season "Sarat" - Autumn! This time of the year is neither too hot nor too humid. It is just pleasingly pleasant. This season has been amply highlighted by other greats too. The poet of Poets, Valmiki, has vividly and gloriously described the glory of Autumn in his epic 'Ramayana'. The great Kalidas also has paid a high tribute to this season in his great creation 'Kumar Samvaba'. This season has been profusely highlighted in other famous Sanskrit Literatures like 'Bhaktikavya' and 'Naishada Charitam'. In this time of the year the biggest, brightest and longest festival of Durga Puja takes place in Bengal. Now this festival has spread all over India as well as abroad. Yet the pomp and splendour of Kolkata's Durga Puja is many miles ahead of others, simply because of its grandeur. After this festivity of Durga Puja all other festivals start coming one after another with a grand finale of Holi - the festival of colours which generally falls in the month of March- the time of Spring.

Irrespective of caste or creed, race or religion, whoever lives in Bengal, especially in Kolkata, gear up in full swing for this fascinating festivity. The whole mood of the society changes suddenly and the economy gets the biggest boost. Everyone, no matter how, rich or poor likes to wear new clothes. Many Puja Committees and Philanthropic organizations like Bharat Sevaashram Sangha, Ramkrishna Mission distribute clothes and food to the poorest of the poor. Families with better financial strength buy jewellery of latest fashion . The image-makers work day and night to finish their job on time. Apart from the strict deadline, image- makers have several competition in the field of creativity as most of their customers are community Puja committees, who amongst them have a ding-dong battle to attract more crowds, more appreciation from the media so that they get more chances of winning different Puja awards given by different big organizations. Ultimately all these factors help Puja organizers to attract better and stronger financial sponsors.

Various other materials are also required to complete an image of Ma Durga. So the makers of other materials are also equally busy. In villages a big number of villagers are relentlessly engaged in producing fruits and flowers along with other agricultural products required for Durga Puja period.

Puja Pandals are of prime importance. Initially they will have to attract the attention of people. So new thinking, newer concepts are always in demand.Decorations both inside and outside the pandals, as well as the total arena will have to be attractive. In all these cases again more and more new imaginative thinking are required. The rule is same-either you come up with new concepts or you perish. Very truly the competition is that tough.Right from the folk painters from remote villages to the educated ones from different art institutions are all in the game.

Durga Puja, the whole city turns into a gloriously glittering dreamland which is one of the biggest attractions of the festivity. It is so gorgeous and colourful. There are so many diverse variations both in subject as well as in techniques. The theme covers from ancient Hindu mythological stories to Mother Teresa. This very secular approach is observed not only in lighting but also in other fields of this most popular festivity. These have brought all the other communities together. Most of the people enjoy it whole- heartedly more as a social festival than anything else. It is a festival of celebration of triumphant. Victory of good over evil-truth over falsehood and above all it is a victory of peace loving humanity over the inhuman tyranny of demons and devils. In many Muslim or Christian dominated areas like New Market, Kidderpore or Park Circus both the communities join hands to enjoy the festivity without any malice. Sikhs or jains or Buddhists and other communities also get absorbed in the spirit of Puja.

Hindus , as usual, always have the mighty magnanimity of mind not only to admire and accept others but also come closer to all. There was a time when many Puja committees requested Mother Teresa, a devoted Roman Catholic and strong preacher of Christianity, to inaugurate their Pujas. Mother too, with her eternal grace did it happily. Nowadays Durga Puja has become a fabulous fascinating festival for all. All kinds of tunes and all kinds of rhythms join together to produce a vivacious symphony of joy.

During Puja days people from far and wide pour into this city of joy and the whole night city roads are thronged by millions of people of various hues and colours. All of them submerge themselves in this magnificent merriment. The whole city becomes delightful in this festive dreamland. All kinds of creative people specially the photographers come from all directions to capture this unparallel festivity in this corner of the country.

In my childhood for kind of fun, I never left my local Puja pandal. Thereafter in my teens I used to walk around different city Puja pandals to enjoy the prolific pomp and splendour of the festival. After I took up photography as my profession I never missed the enchanting charm of Puja to capture its many moods and moments.

Last year Mehra Brothers-C.K. and S.K. proposed to publish a book on Durga Puja . I immediately accepted their kind idea and started shooting fresh and methodically and in detail. Right from the day of Mahalaya to the day after the final immersion I went on shooting. It was a huge and hard task. I was sure that this wide canvas can not be covered by any single photographer like me. Thus I requested, young agile large-hearted very talented hardworking photographer, Ashoke Paul to lend his hand to portray the spirit of Puja. He did his part far better than me.

Many of the brilliant photographs were captured by him.

During the Puja days there is always a crisis of a dependable transport for the whole range of ten - twelve days for 24 hours. A gentleman with lion's heart Sri Bijoyesh Dubey came to my rescue. Very sincere thanks to you Mr. Dubey. Thanks to my dear friend Dr. Shyamal Kanti Chakraborty, the Ex- Director of Indian Museum for writing the supporting article. A nice unassuming gentle man Sri Sushil Pal do deserve a big thank from me for his constant assistance.

I conclude with my heart-felt gratitude to Mr. C.K. Mehra and his younger brother Mr. S.K. Mehra and their loving daughter Sona as well as the whole staff of Mehras for taking all the trouble to publish this first ever colour pictorial book on Durga Puja.

The Festival of Durga

Dr. Shyamalkanti Chakravarti

As autumn comes, drops of dew turn diamonds. Fallen from the flowering tree, shiulis (a seasonal flower) spread soft-white carpet with pink-orange sprays woven on it. Those tiny flowers and the honeydew greet her home. She who visits her mother (Menaka) after a year!

She is Durga who crushed Durgama, a demon of drought camouflaging as buffalo (mahisha) and that is why invoked as Mahishasuramardini, the goddess of fertility and supreme energy. She dwells in an inaccessible hilly fortress (durga), protecting people from difficulties (durgati)-all these tend to attribute her name as Durga.

The rituals indicate her as vegetation goddess worshipped at the beginning of harvesting season in association with nine efficacious plants (navapatrika). The navapatrika consists of nine leaves of rambha (representing Brahmani), kachchvi (associated with Kalika), haridra (with Durga), jayanti (with Karttiki), bilva (with Shiva), dadima (with Raktadantika), ashoka with (shokarahita), manaka (with Chamunda) and dhanya (with Lakshmi). The nine goddess presiding over nine plants are collectively called navadurga. Sometime she takes her name vanadurga, the goddess in the forest; parnas-habari the tribal girl clad in leaves; or a shakambhari who survives on cultivable grass. Thus in the worship of Durga the vegetation forces of nature play a great role. The devotees duly propitiate her with offerings of fruits and flowers as also nuts and betel leaves.

She is being invoked from time immemorial. In the earliest cosmic age of the Hindus called satyayuga, king Suratha had the privilege of invoking the goddess continually for three years; while in the next period which is known as tretayuga Ravana, the lord of Lanka, paid her a solemn tribute during the season of spring, which is why the goddess was christened as vasanti.

The next was Rama who had awakened the goddess at an odd and untimely moment of the year (akala bodhana). The ancients believe that the summer solstice is the daytime of the gods in heaven when sun dwells in the northern hemisphere (uttarayana). The winter solstice that moves the sun to southern hemisphere (dakshinayana) is the nocturnal period, which embarrasses the divine beings to awake from deep slumber. The epic hero of the Ramayana had no other alternative but to invoke the goddess at this hour of emergency in order to combat Ravana and rescue Sita (his wife) from his clutches.

The ritual for invocation begins at the end of the fortnight of ancestor worship (pitri-paksha) as also the initial day of the fortnight of the goddesses(devi-paksha). The devout Hindus perform rites with a holy dip into the river Ganga paying homage to the sun-their taskmaster overhead. The festival begins.....

At the clay-modelers' unassuming ateliers, the idol-makers spend many restless days and sleepless nights with piles of clay, wooden frames, vibrant colours, woolyglow. The goddess is created in the image of woman with maternal grace and a sense of compassion. What artistry in mud!

Clay is called the soft flesh of mother Earth; stones are her bones, hard enough. The clay-modelers and sculptors in India have been fashioning images of the goddess both in burnt clay and lithic medium from almost two thousand years ago. The earliest evidence of both comes from Nagar in and canvas. But Bengal has made a unique contribution in creating her images in soft clay. Literary evidences maintain that making of clay idols of the goddess goes back to one thousand years past. Both the markandeya chandi and the durgabhaktitarangini call these images either mrinmayi or mahimayi, composed in clay. All these tend to prove that in Bengal there was an established practice of worshipping the perishable clay images *(kshanika murti)* of goddess during autumnal season *(sharat kale mahapuja)*.

So did Ramachandra of the Ramayana. The Pandavas-Yudhisthira and Arjuna were the heroes of the other great epic, the Mahabharata, who performed worship of Durga to receive the godly belessings while in exile as also on the eve of the battle at Kurukshetra.

Meanwhile the clay-modeler has learnt from his forefathers and anecdote of the Ramayana, which narrated the mysterious disappearance of a lotus bud from the offering bowl of one hundred eight such flowers placed before the goddess. To compensate this Rama, who was fondly termed kamala-lochana for his beautiful eyes, comparable only to the lotus buds, decided to offer one eye uprooting it with a sharp arrow. Being pleased with his devotion, Devi returned the flower, which she had artfully stolen from the offering vessel. The clay-modeler remembers the story as he delineates the eyes of Devi and fills up two small circles with black pigment to shape the eyeballs.

The patua or kumbhakar, whose hereditary profession was drawing traditional paintings or making of pottery, took to the image making and transferred his artistic skill into this art. Apart from Iconographic obligations handed down to him over centuries, he innovates new formula of decoration. A new generation of artisans emerge who enjoys beautifying the decorative accessories for ritualistic performances. The full-blown-flower -hangings to resemble a series of moons (chandmala); winnowing fans used for cleaning of corn now painted with a colourful bust of Durga; a family, surmounted by an array of golden leaves bring to their artifacts a new dimension. The pujafestival has given them a pleasant mood for experimentation!

The structural form of the chalchitra literally meaning 'painted ceiling' is inspired by an indigenous element of the temple architecture of Bengal. The cornice or eave of the roof on Bengal temples, which are in contour, has clearly been inherited from frame of thatched hut bent in the form of bow. These parabolic cornices of the temple facade are carved with external decorations of terracotta relief resolving into a diaper of square panels containing pictures repeated over the entire surface. It is interesting that this bent up decoration precedes the main deity inside the shrine; while in case of the image of Durga, the chalchitra recedes to the background.

The three days of puja is in the offering-tolls the bell! the market is full to its brim with special commodities meant for rituals. The garlands and flowers, lamps and candles, plants and grains are now a collector's pride as essential items. The traditional drums and bell-metal musical instruments are immediately sought after to create an atmosphere of tonal variation. Only the other day at dawn of devipaksha, a welcome programme is aired in preparation of the festive mood. The reception songs or agamani are sung by the wandering bards (baul) at the doorsteps of villagers. On the day of awakening (bodhan) also called adhivasa or auspicious begining , a youthful plantain tree is given the shape of a maiden (kalabau) making an effigy of the goddess to be bathed in the holy water of the river Ganga and brought her home. The only rite required to be completed is that the devotees would carry back on their heads the purnaghatas-pitcherful of water to sanctify the places of worship.

Waiting for the goddess with eagerness and zeal, men and women irrespective of caste, paint their walls either with primitive figurines or decorate the floor with drawings of floral and foliage designs.A full-tray tribute of flowers and auspicious grass (durva) is made ready for her warm reception. The hand-fan made of plam leaf supports an earthen concave dish (durgasara) with colourful impression of the goddess and her associates. All is set for the lady of the light who has been energized by the extreme power of all and every devata, the illumined souls of heaven.

The myth relating to the creation as also glorification of the goddess Durga is alluded to the devimahatmya, durgasaptashati or shrichandi which forms part of the old narrative literature the markandeyapurana of the Hindu religion. But the earliest occurrence of the name of Durga is found in the aitareya aranyaka, a later Vedic text; while her extant images are unearthed in India years from now. During the early centuries of the Christian era the goddess is seen pressing down a buffalo on its spine with bare hands.Sometimes she is lifting the hind-part of the animal by its tail impaling it with her trident. During the classical epoch, the demon assumes the half- animal half human form. He emerges in the Middle Ages fully in human representation without his bovine head.The arms of the goddess vary from place to place at different periods of time and space. A two-armed deity of the early centuries, she has also been conceived later an exalted woman of even thiry-two hands displaying emblems and weapons that manifest her overwhelming prowess and personality. At times she represents placid quality or benign expression (saumya) and contrast element of fierceful (ghora) aspect. Reacting to her fury against the demons the arms of the goddess fanned out in ten directions brandishing a variety of weapons including trident (trishula), noose (pasha), sword (khadga), bow (dhanu) and arrow (shara); as well as battle axe (parashu), thunderbolt (vajra), mace (goda), shield (khetaka), and sceptre (danda). Now as ten-armed goddess she began challenging the demon Mahishasura at a never-endig war. As a warrior goddess she to annihilate the terror of drakness, evil and ignorance.

With the emergence of nuclear unit families in the changing circumstances of society, the Durga family composed erstwhile within a fram work of one stele under the same chalchitra has virtually undergone a split with the placement of the other godly figures separately. A new term was coined for this arrangement calling them *thain thain murti.*

The iconological development is equally related to the spatial factor of Durga worship. The three distinctive phases are discernible. Historically, the goddes had her initial home in the sanctum sanctorum of a temple built by stone or brick. Her mid-term arrangement was the chandimandapa or a more common term for it, the pandals provided her a favourite shelter by courtesy of the baroyari- community puja. Her physical form also changed according to the needs of the age. As household deity she bears a complexion of bright yellow as the atasi flower *(atasibarnabha)* or sometimes vermillion-red *(sindurabarna)*. In some images her offspring interchange their placements according to local traditions.

The ecstasy of creative faculty, the enthusiasm for innovation as also the zeal and challenges for experimentation motivated a group of young artists of Bengal to take recourse to image making. They tested their own talents and came victorious. These professional sculptors dervied their inspiration and ideas from the traditional folk art and even used unconventional raw mateials to prepare the images as also their temporary abodes. It was a peculiar blending of fine art and decorative crafts which started dominating the scene.

The festivity surrounding Durga encompasses all and sundry ingredients that are required for everday life of a man. The community puja has been introduced as sarvajanin i.e., for all, and for the welfare of all. Each and every member of the society engaged in any profession becomes a part of the celebration either consciously or in an indirect manner. Hence, the priest quite unknowingly chants a hymn of the vak-sukta from the holy scripture of the Rig-veda composed by the ancient sages and simultaneously calls for a pinch of earth from the so-called undignified doorsteps of the prostitute quarters.

The cosmopolitan city, towns and villages wear a festive look. Joyous and happy, people of every generation without prejujdice to their faith and religion flock to visit the temporary abodes of Devi the decor of which mesmerize them. During the leisurely hours of the three charming days of saptami, ashtami and navami, when drudgery of monotonous life takes backstage, one enters his absolutely own dreamland and chooses personal paradise. With curiosity, expectation, laughter, and passion for decoration-in a word the enlivened soul of men and women dance in joy.

The illuminated city adds colour to life during the festival. In an unending journey towards their goddess, people like pilgrims pass by fort, hillock, old and dilapidated temple, historic palace and even a modern show-window or a big shoppe - all artificially fabricated. They also move, who cannot keep pace with this procession of human race, as hands come forward for handicapped and old. They gaze at the magic of light - an illusionary translation of rural life, mythological narratives, vegetal world and the playful pastime. The devotees wrapped in darkness of the night admire the excellence of Devi glowing in light, murmuring the mantra which says - take us to the shore of light from the ocean of darkness(tamaso ma jyotirgamaya)! They clasp their palms to pay homage to Devi, beg her mercy praying for beauty(rupam), victory(jayam), fame(Yashah) and humbly requesting her to make them free from jealousy (dvishah). Then offer handful of flowers, trefoil leaves of bilva and green gras(durva) to reach and bow at her feet. The priest brings to them the water of peace.

The sun sets and light fades out. A series of gig-lamps take charge of the evening show. The fragrance from incense burner pervades the air while flame of fire purifies the body and soul. The three evening chores now end. The next is the day of victory over the demon (Vijaya dashami). Devi vanquishes Mahishasura! Rama kills Ravana! and Uma (another name of Durga) is set for bidding farewell to her home, sweet home. After enjoying a three-day sojourn with the host of relatives at her parental home she takes leave. All married women, as if her friends, put vermillion mark on the hair parting of her forehead, praying for permanent conjugal life as she is soon to return to her spouse, Shiva!

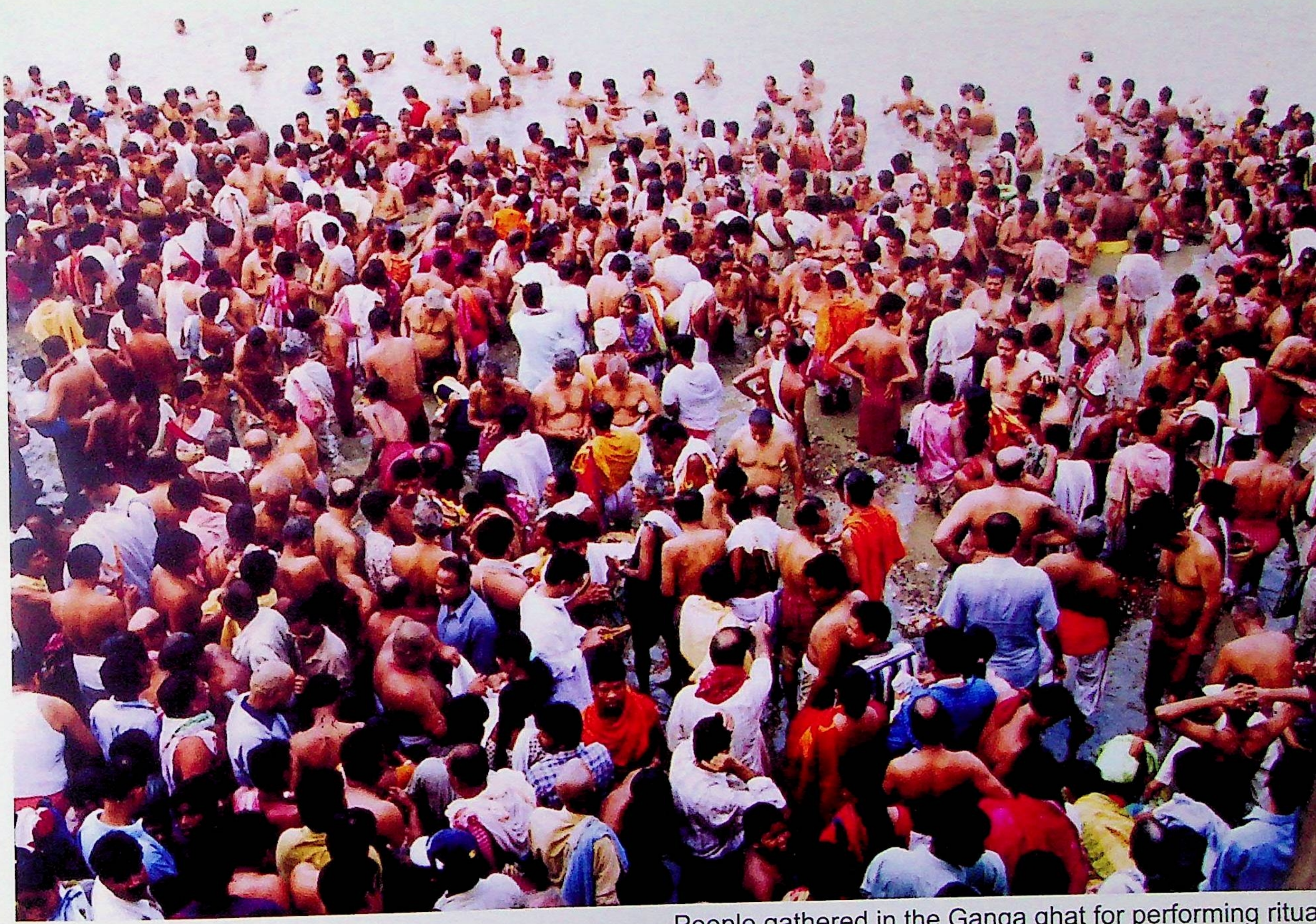
Her image is immersed in the holy water of the Ganga only to bring her back within a purnaghata after a year on the occasion of the bodhana, the great awakening. Back home the devotees scribble a leaf with the auspicious name of Durga as her omnipresent face reflects in the oil of a lighted earthen lamp to enliven her memory. An ardent appeal still lingers in the air samvasarante devi punaragamanaya cha. (Oh Goddess! Come again when the year rolls by.)

This cyclic movement of Devi from awakening (bodhana) to immersion (visarjan) as narrated in the foregoing pages has been very faithfully captivated by Sunil K. Dutt, an eminent visual chronicler of our time. His celluloid frames are, as if, transformed into colourful flowers prepared for paying homage at the altar of the goddess Durga. After a painstaking fieldwork for a number of years in and around the city and its suburbs, Dutt and his associate Ashoke Paul, have documented almost all the details of the rituals regarding Durga puja. The photographs reveal their keen observation, sense of sympathy, socio-religious awareness and above all human approach towards the subject. Few bubbling moments of the festival claiming a permanent impression in the minds of the people have been thoughtfully recorded here for the posterity.

The mood is set

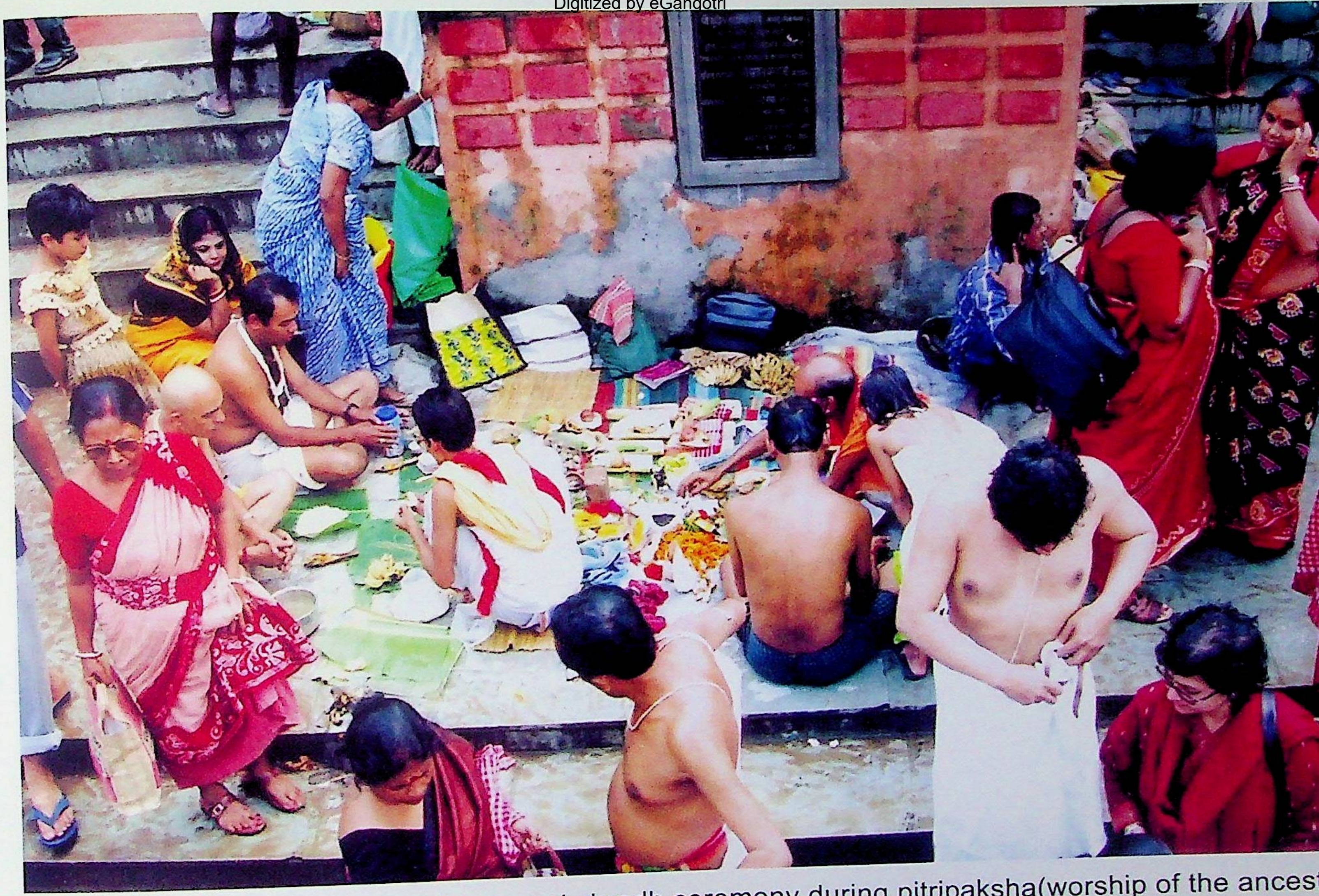
Tiny shiuli flowers on the carpet of green grass heralding the advent of autumn

Advent of Puja symbolized by nature

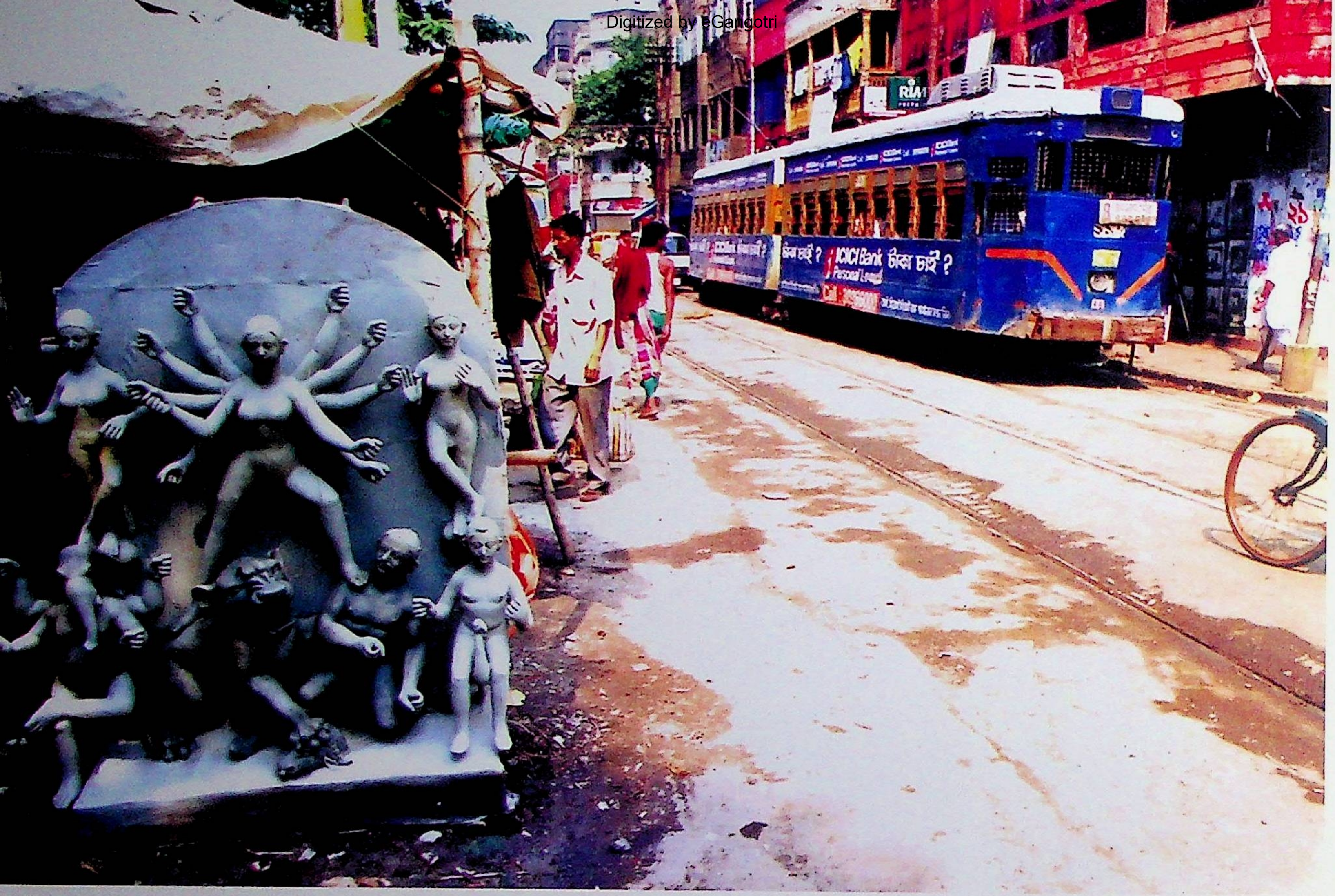


People gathered in the Ganga ghat for performing ritua

A dip in the River Ganges and chanting the hymns purify a devotee ready to perform rituals

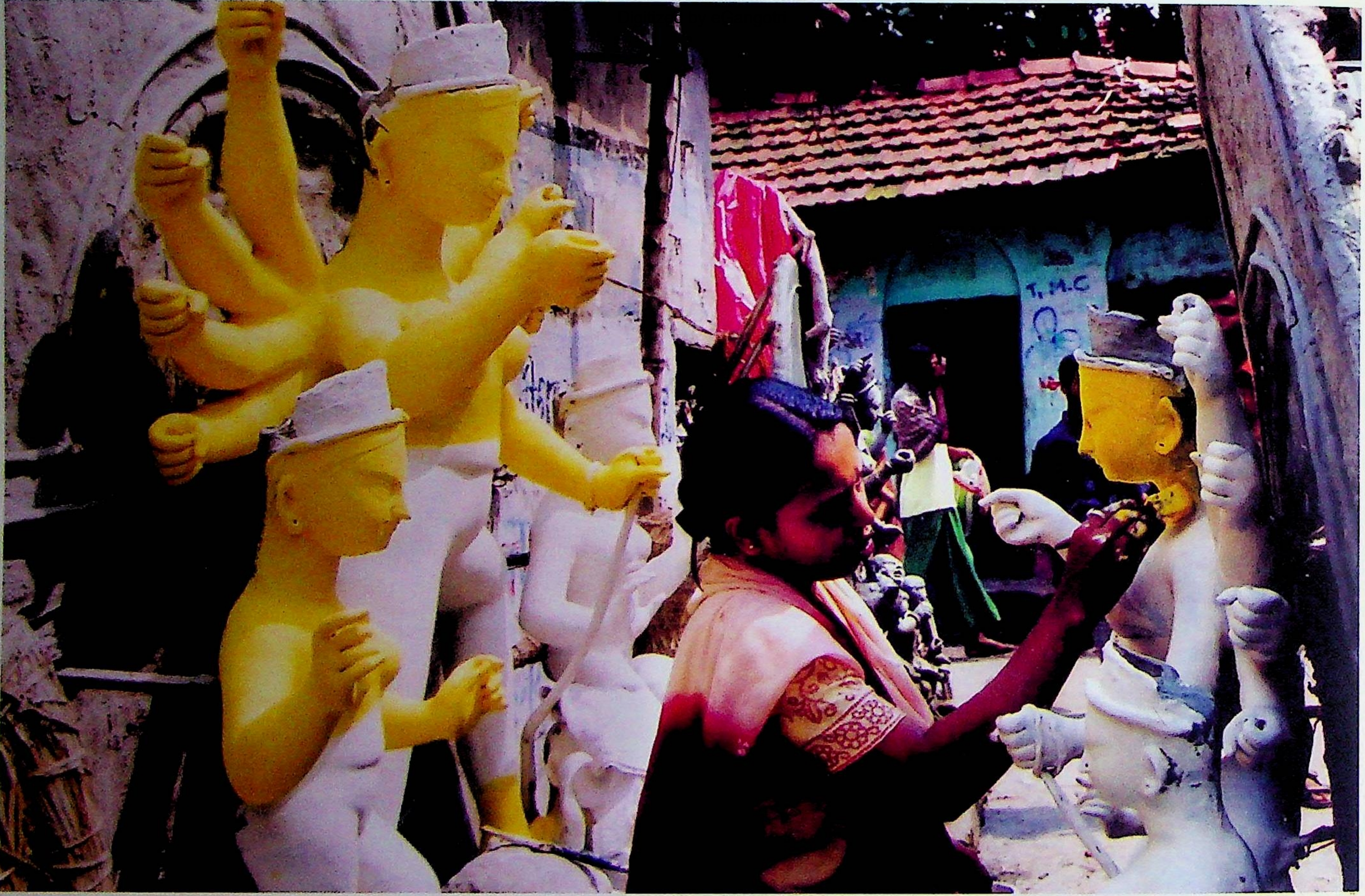


These ghats are platforms for annual shradh ceremony during pitripaksha(worship of the ancest

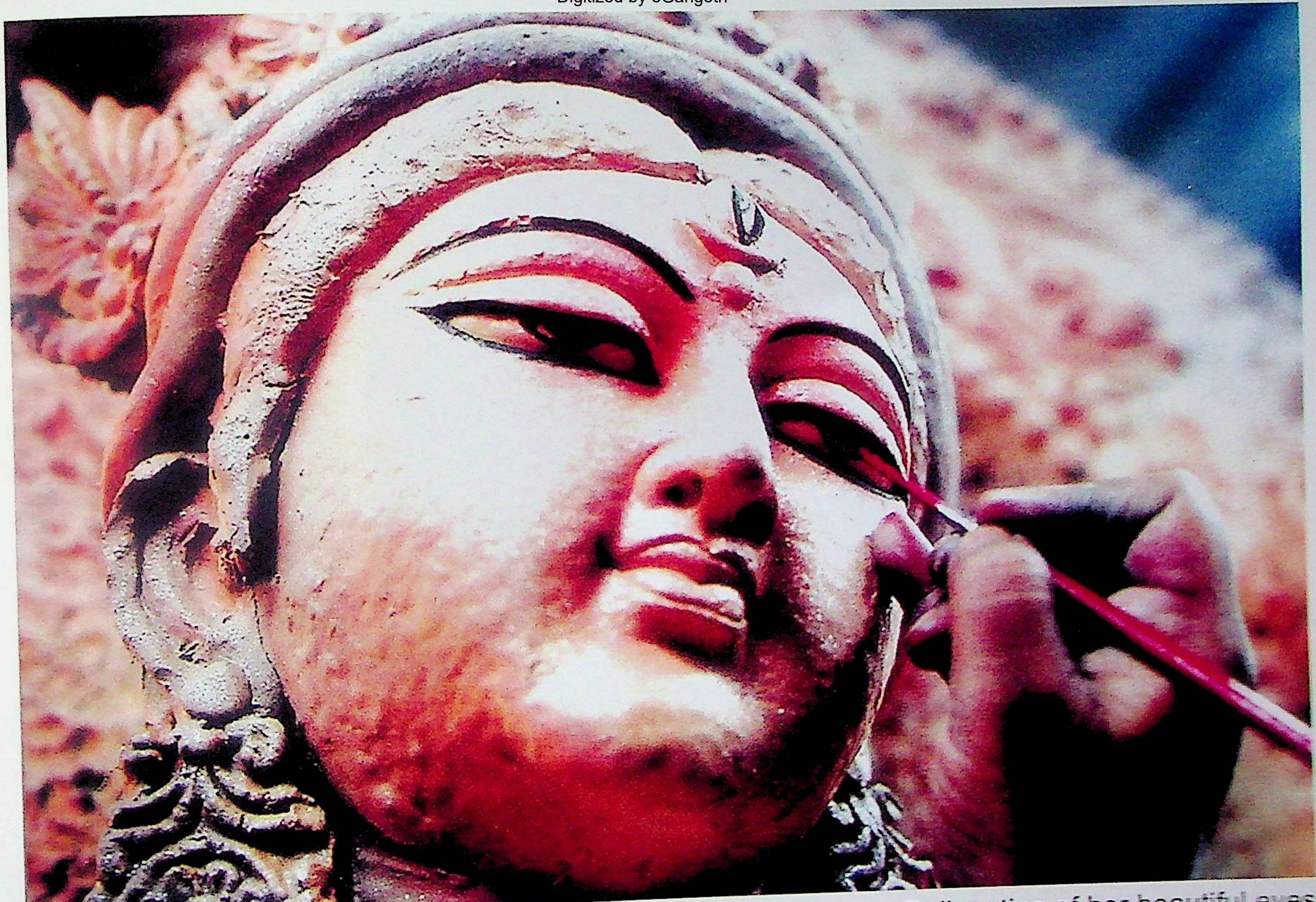

ICICI Bank
Personal Loan

A clay-coat shape of Devi is now ready

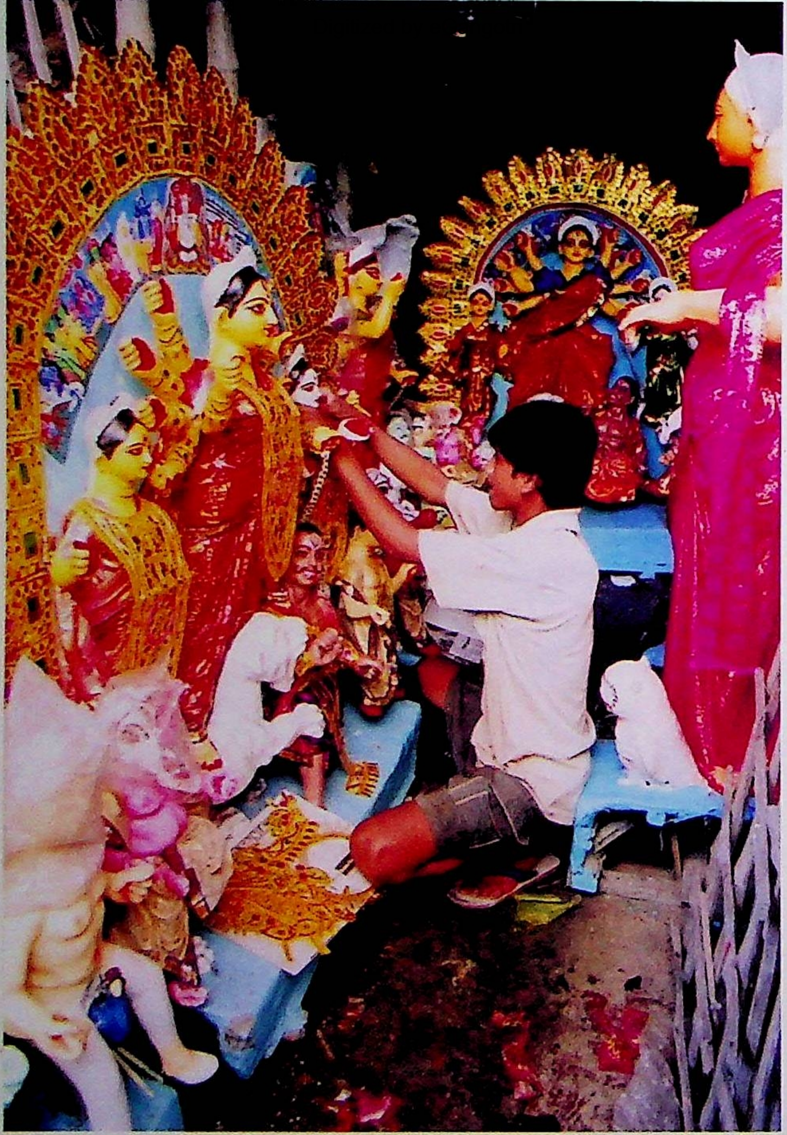
Now clay Image of Devi Du



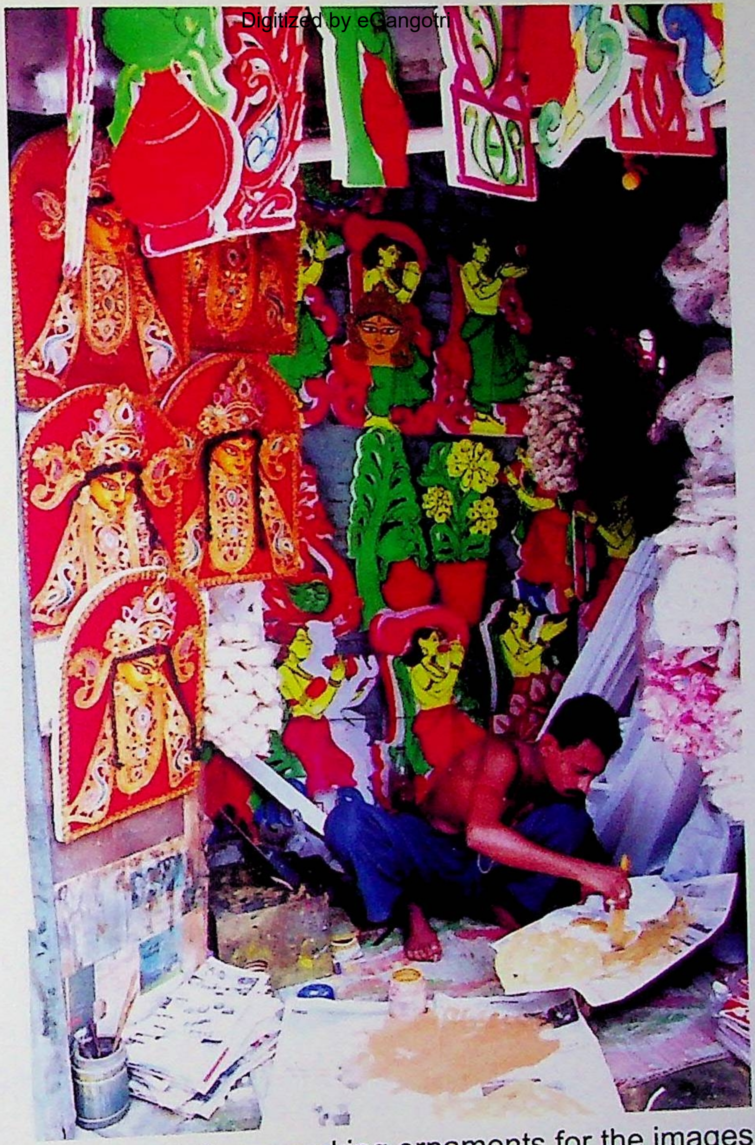
The first coating of yellow



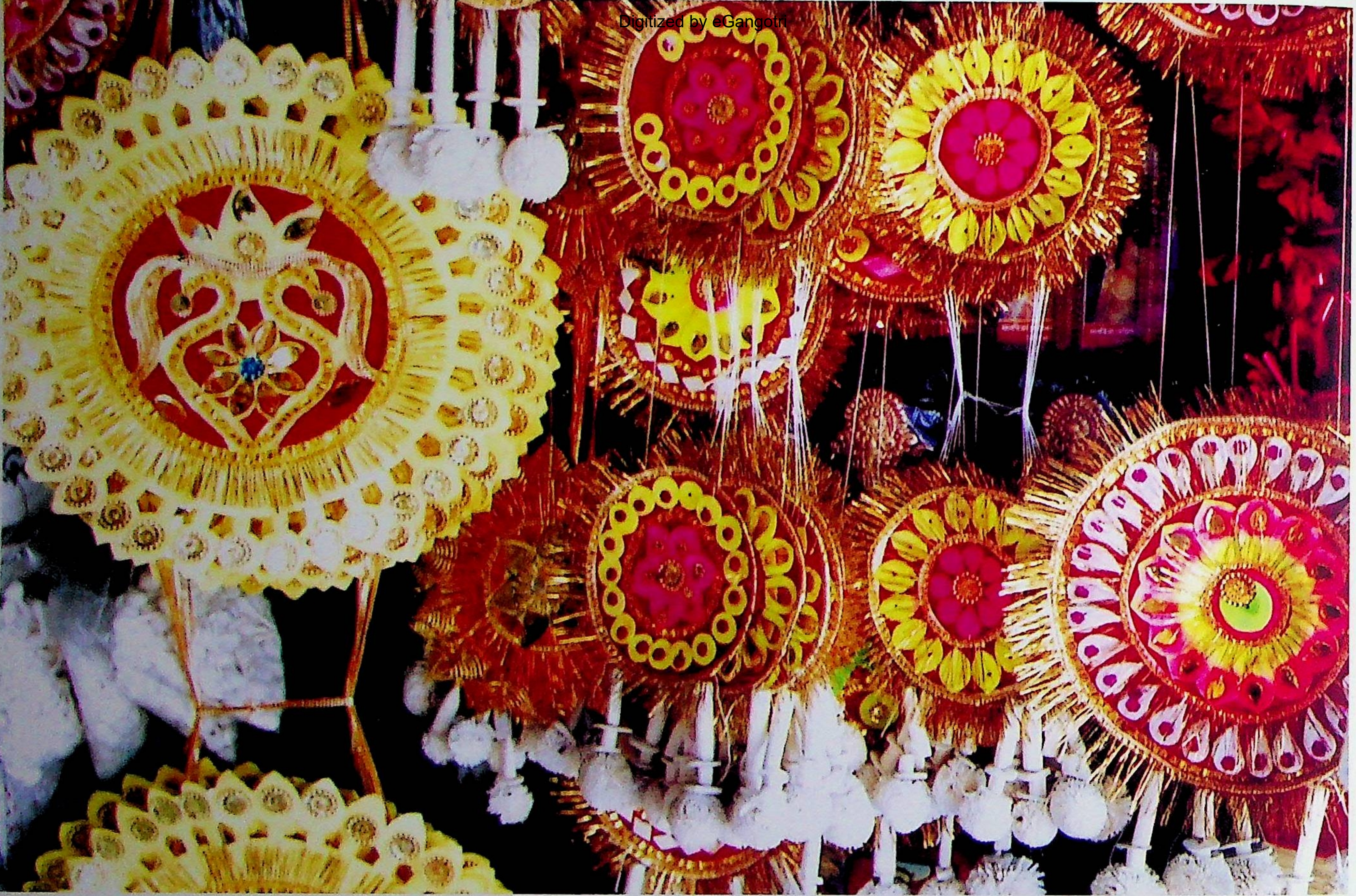
Delineation of her beautiful eyes



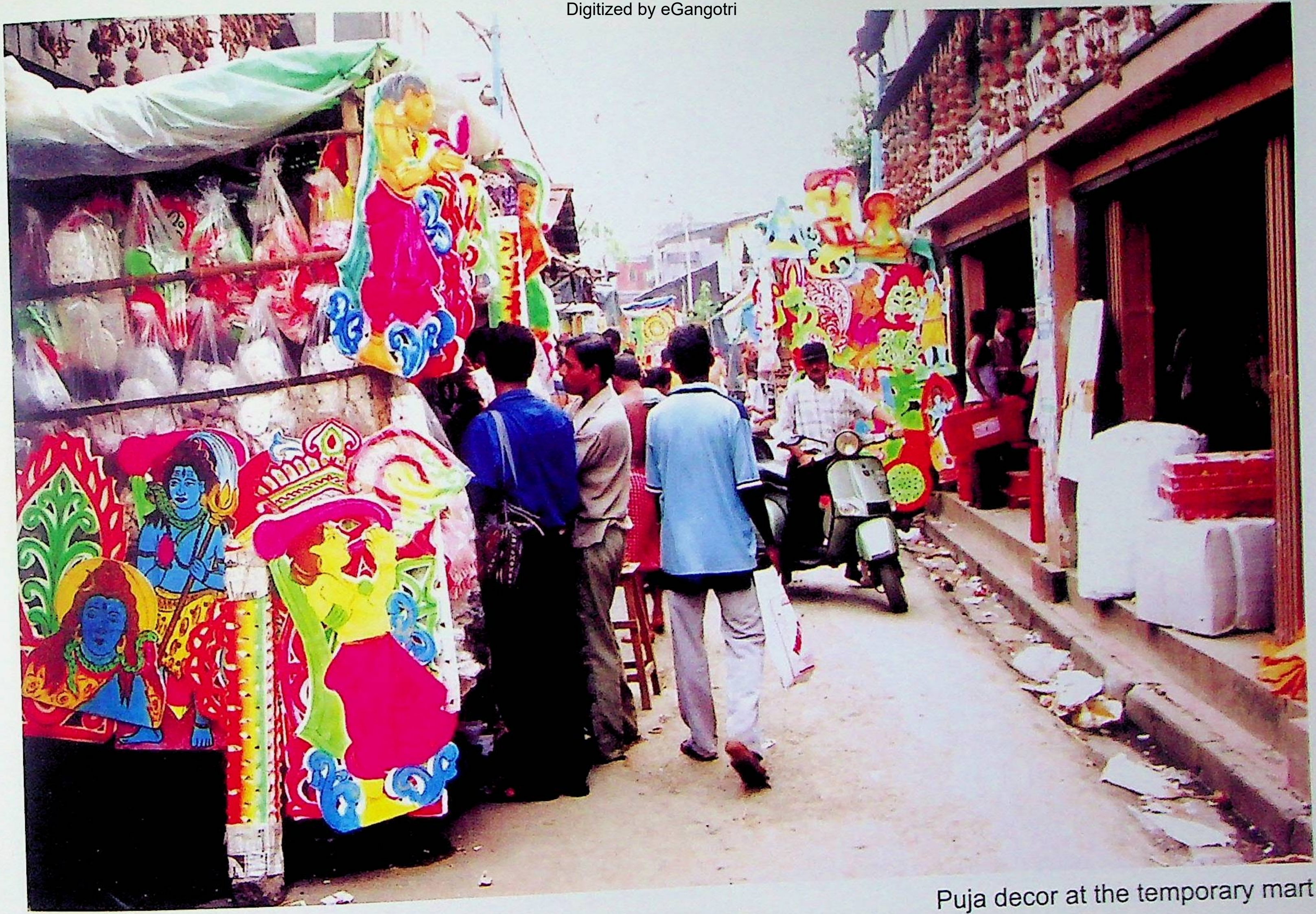
Adorning the images with golden ornaments



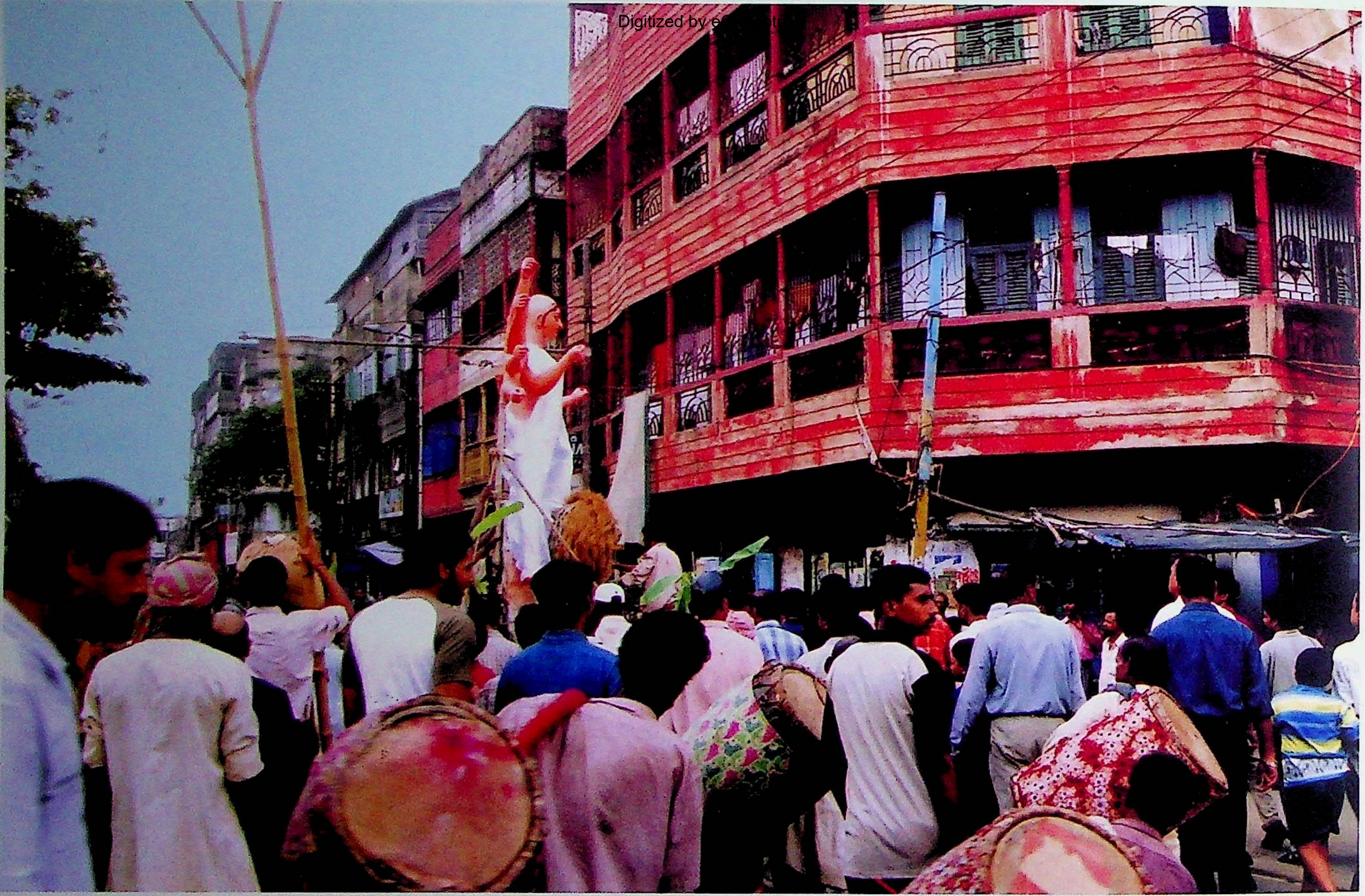
Artisans making ornaments for the images



Colourfull flower Hangings resembling series of moon(Chaandmala)



Puja decor at the temporary mart

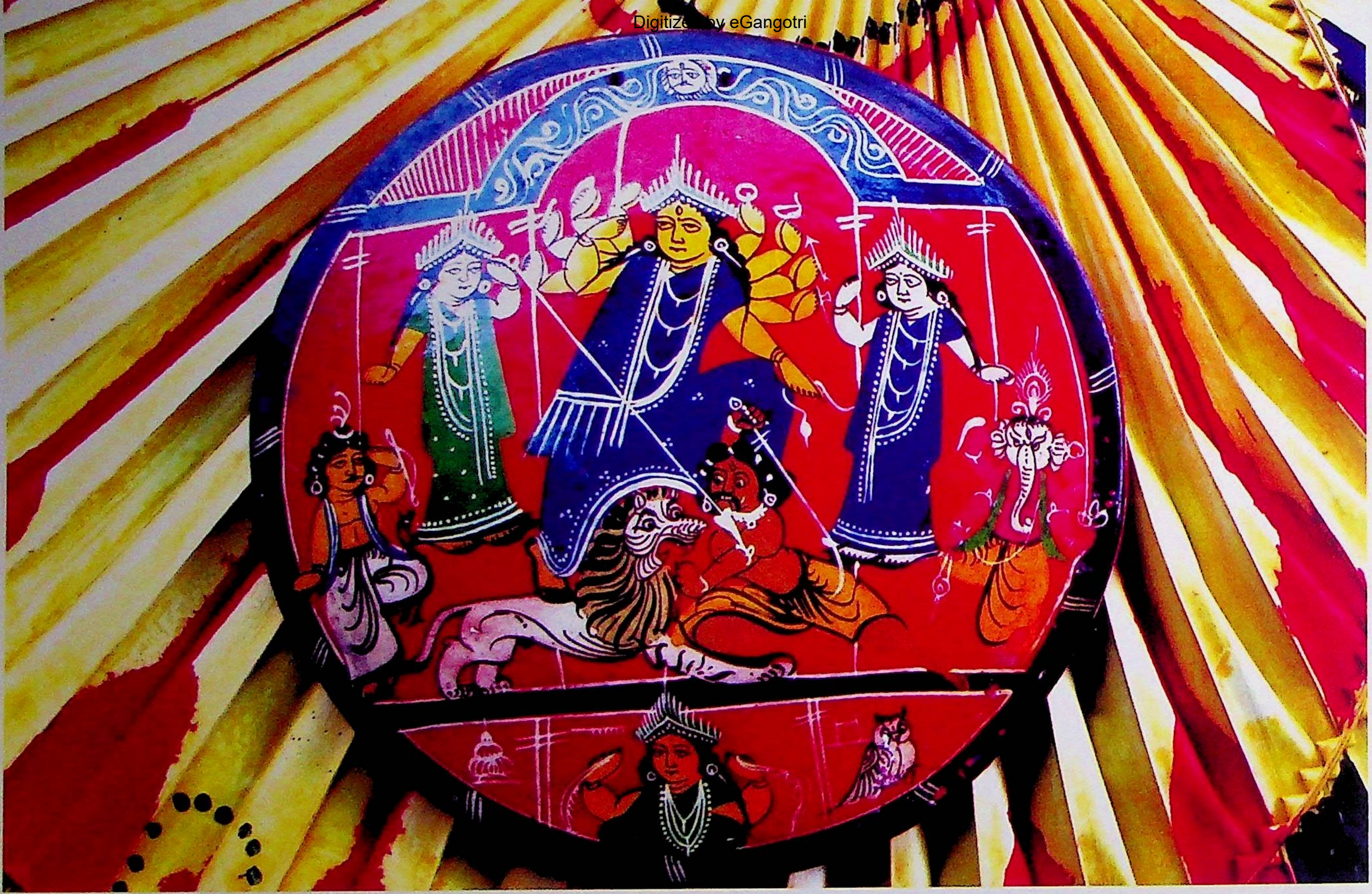


Devi being taken to the pandal

Conventional drums lie newly dressed

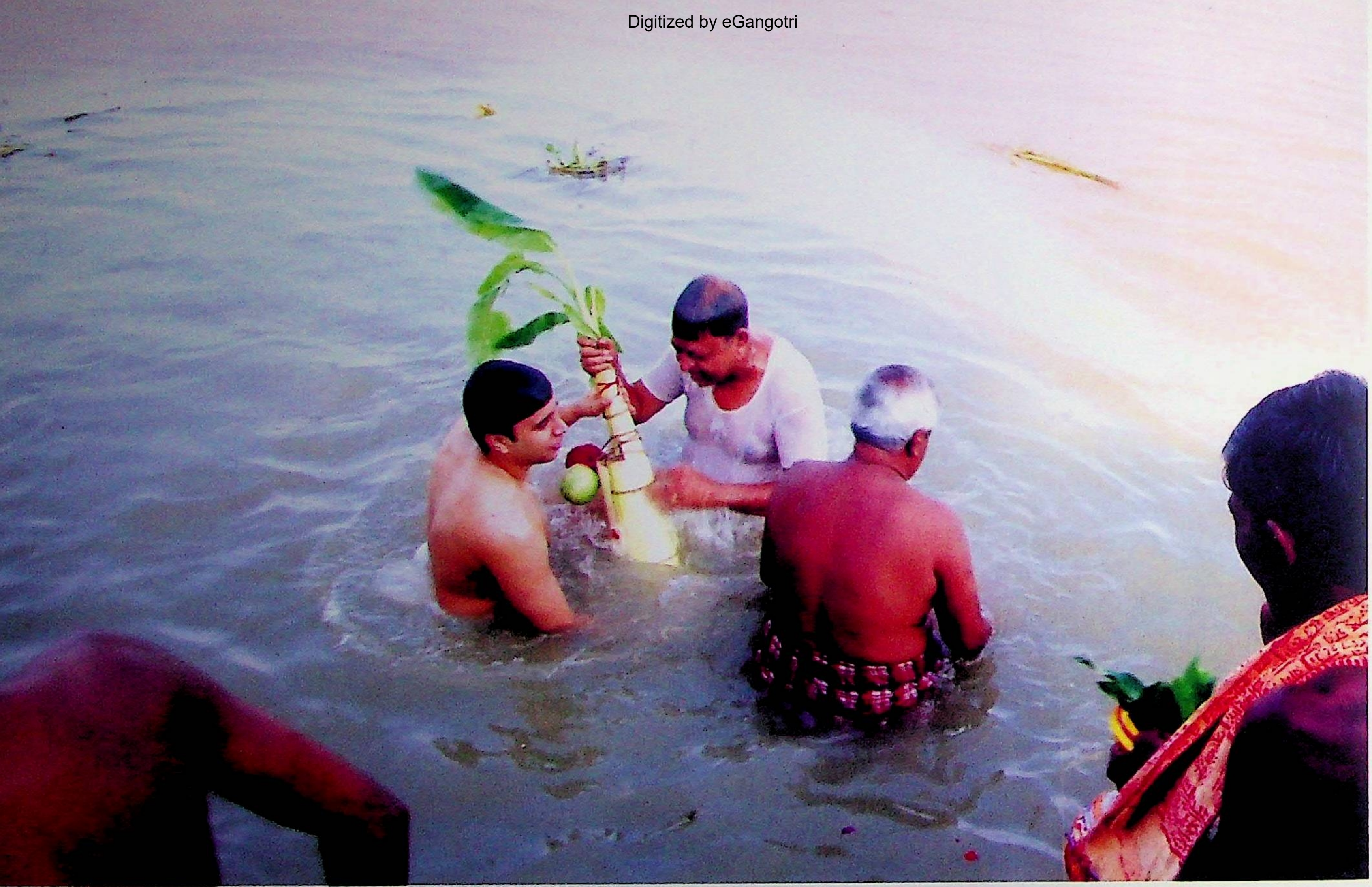
Plants of plantains gathered green in the market

Buying and Selling Lotus in the Flower market

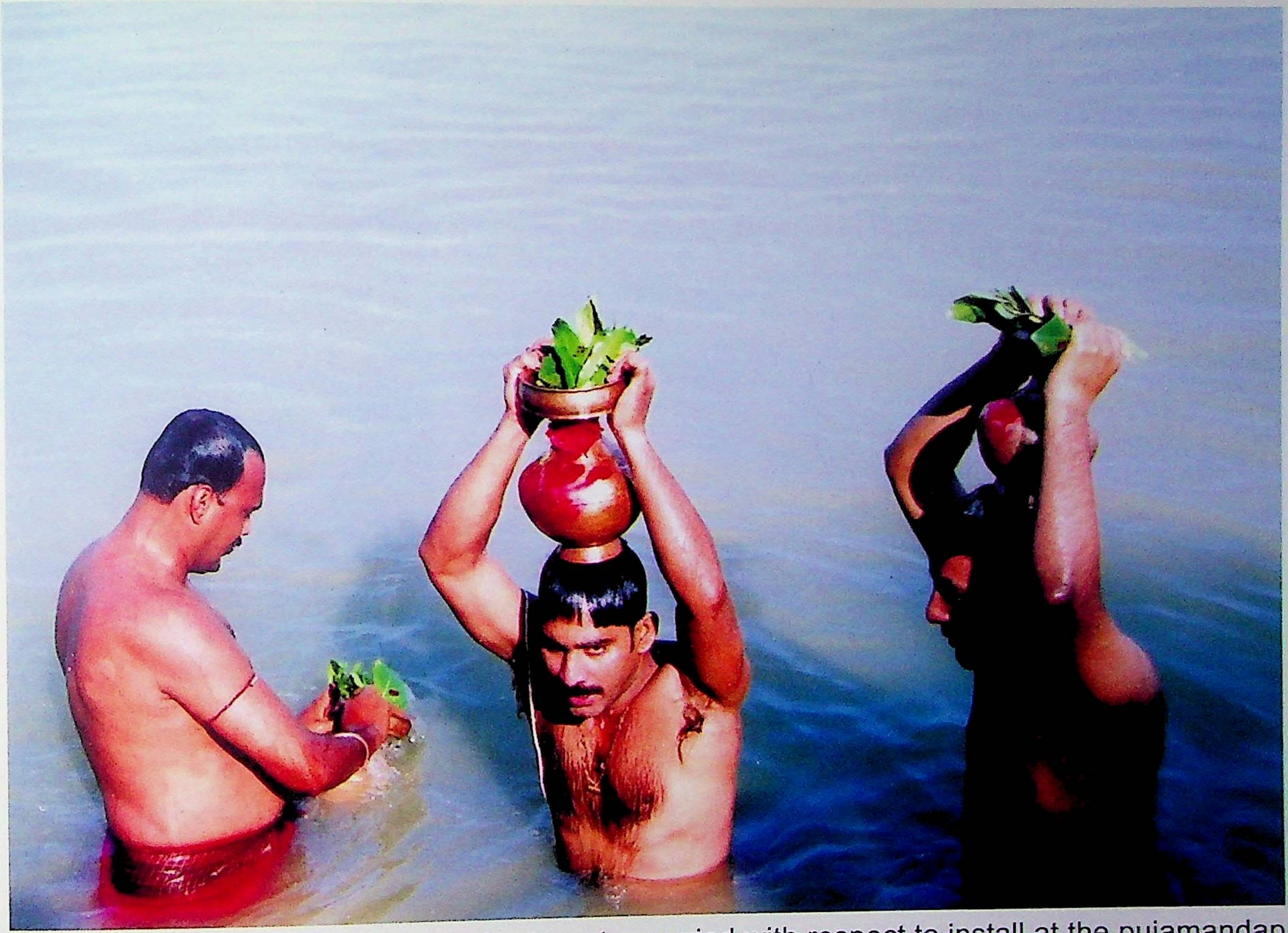


Durgasara placed on a palm-leaf fan

Colourful lamps and candles wait for a kindle

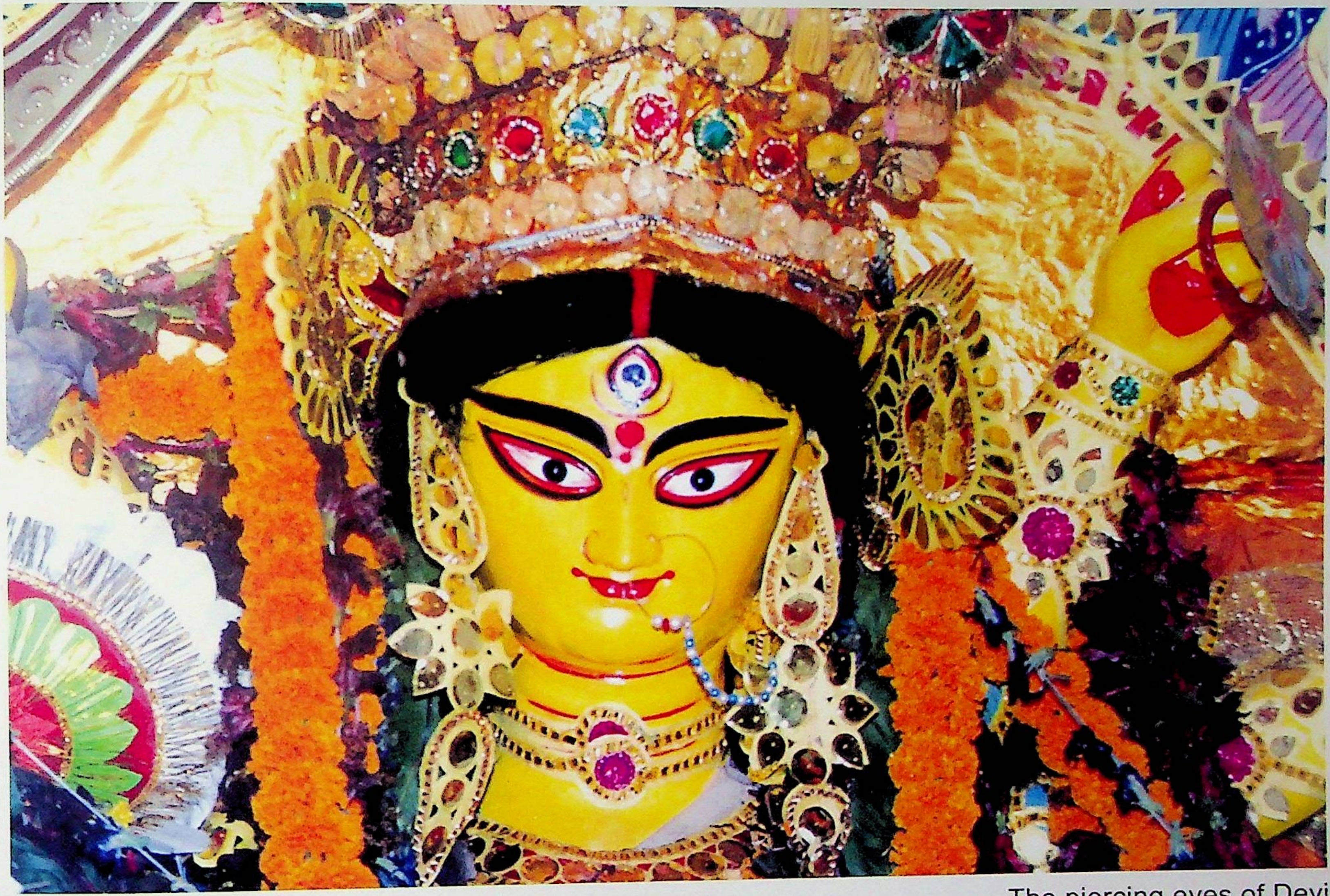


An auspicious bath for kalabau



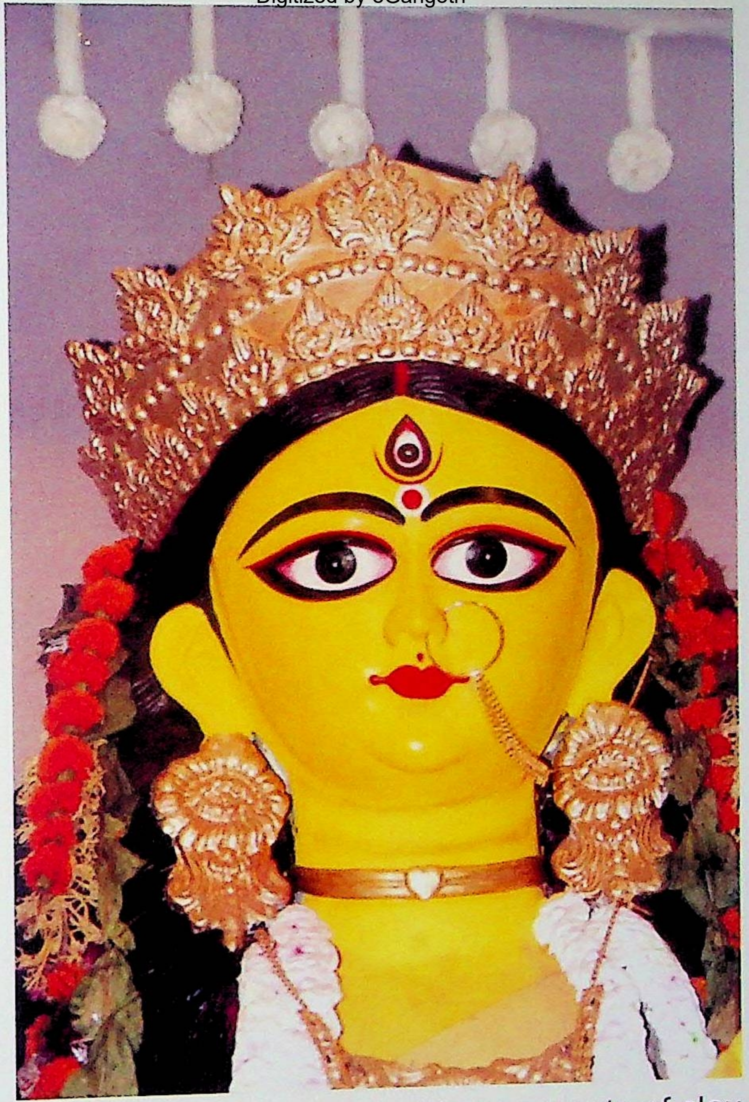
Piteherful of holy water carried with respect to install at the pujamandap

Devi in different forms

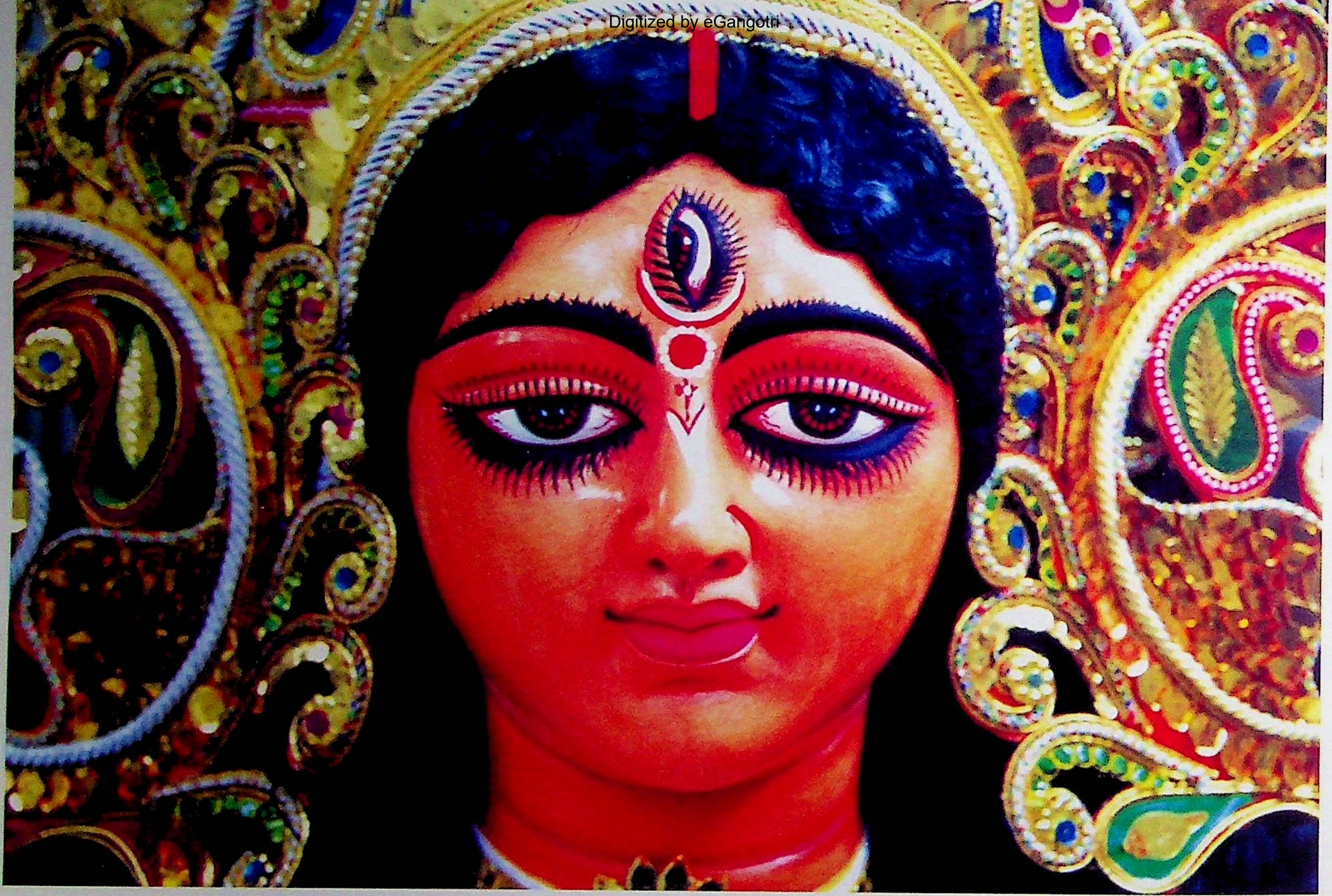


The piercing eyes of Devi

Victorious she blows her conch

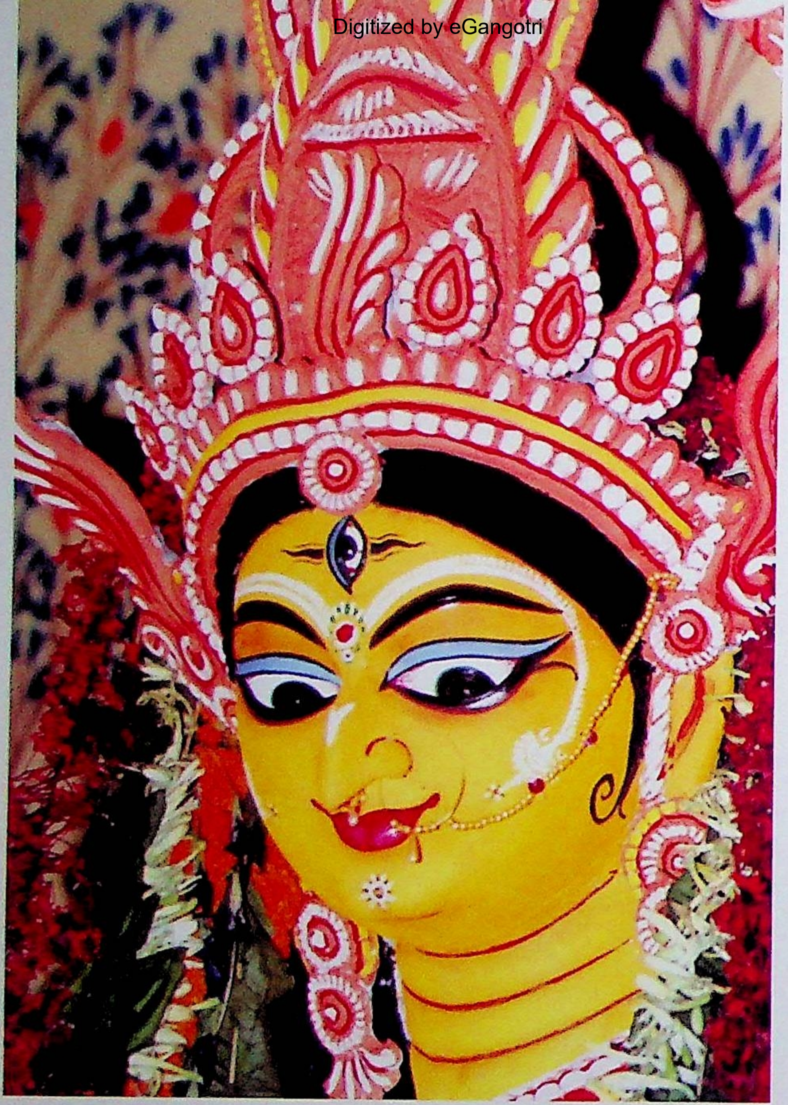


Devi adorned with ornaments of clay

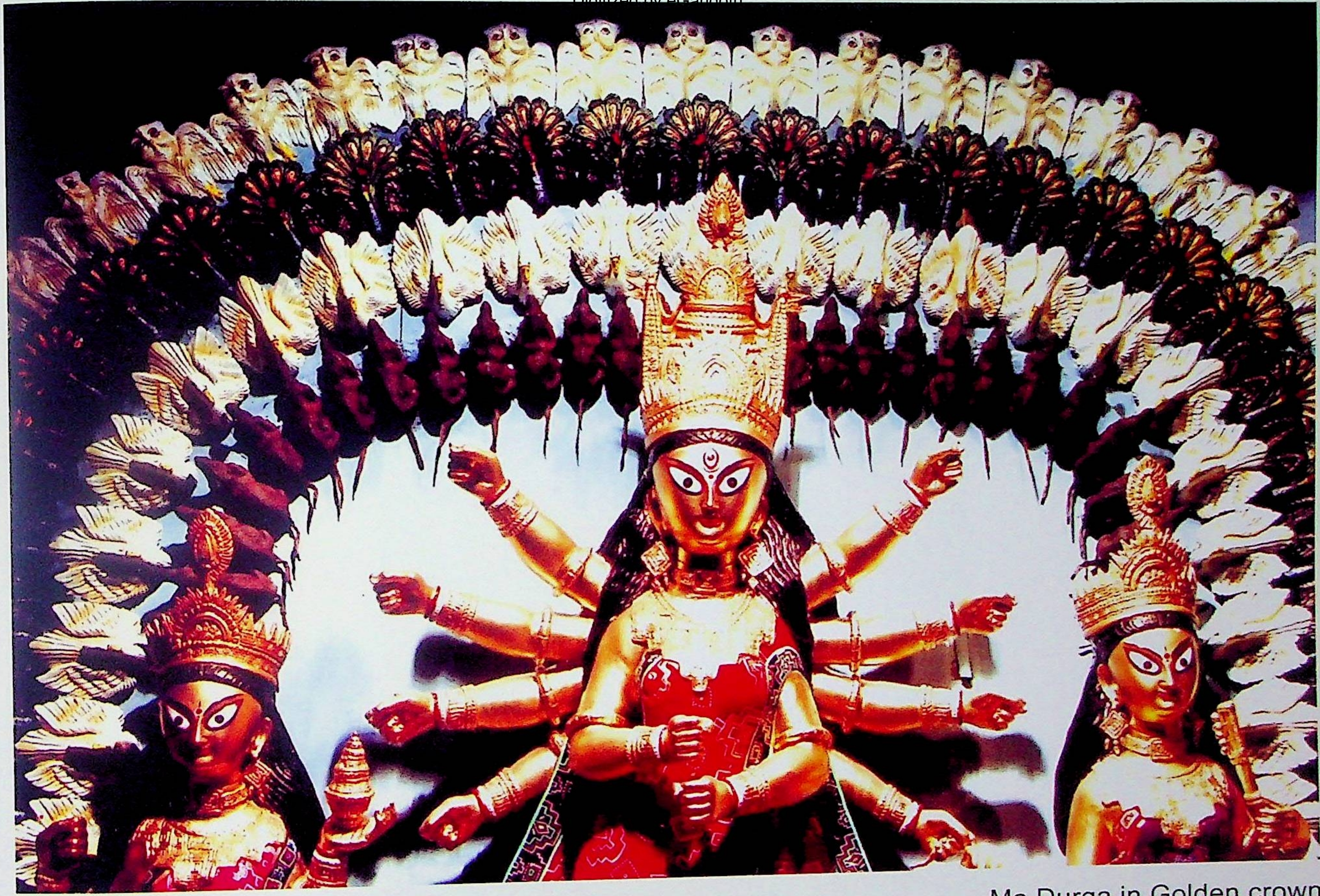


Three-eyed (trinayani) Durga golden and bright

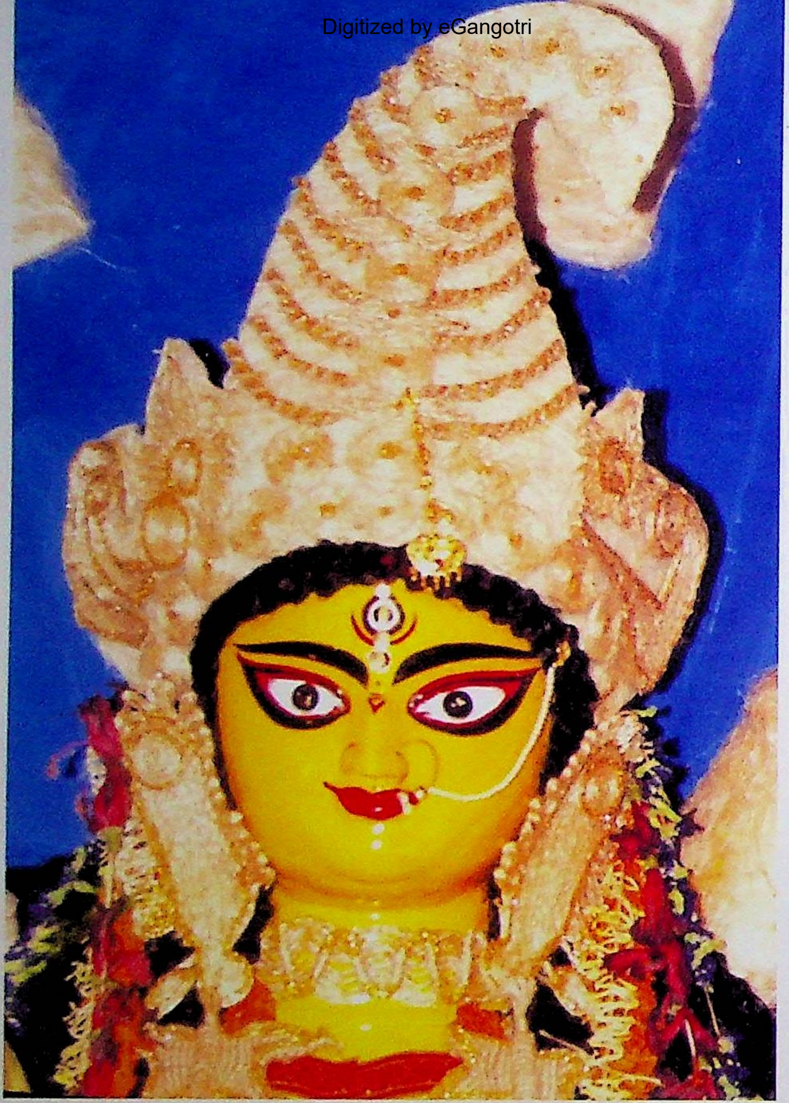
Durga - Epitome of serenity and Simplicity



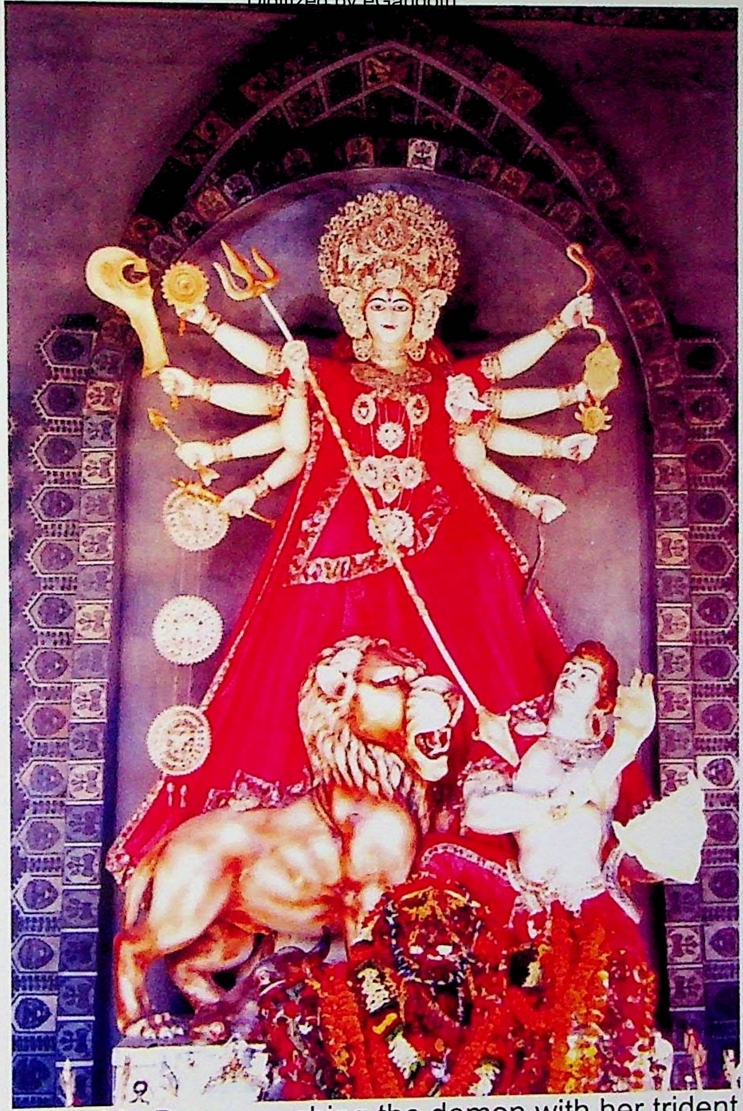
Devi symbolizes power of 'SHAKTI'



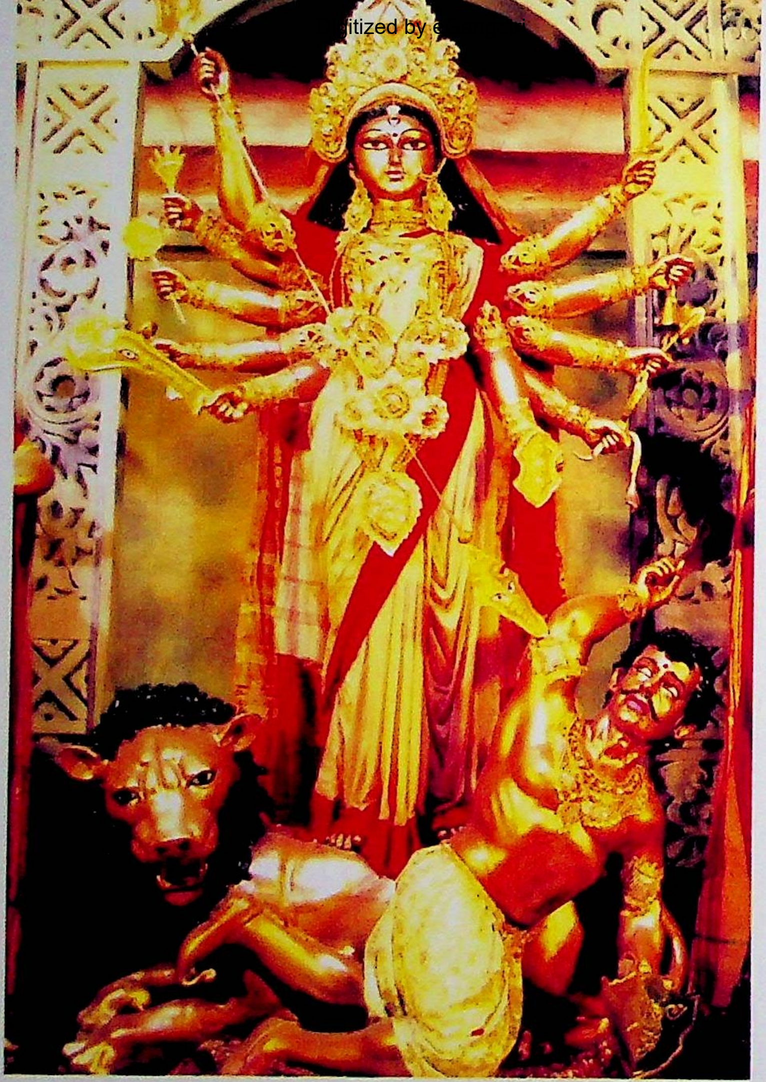
Ma Durga in Golden crown



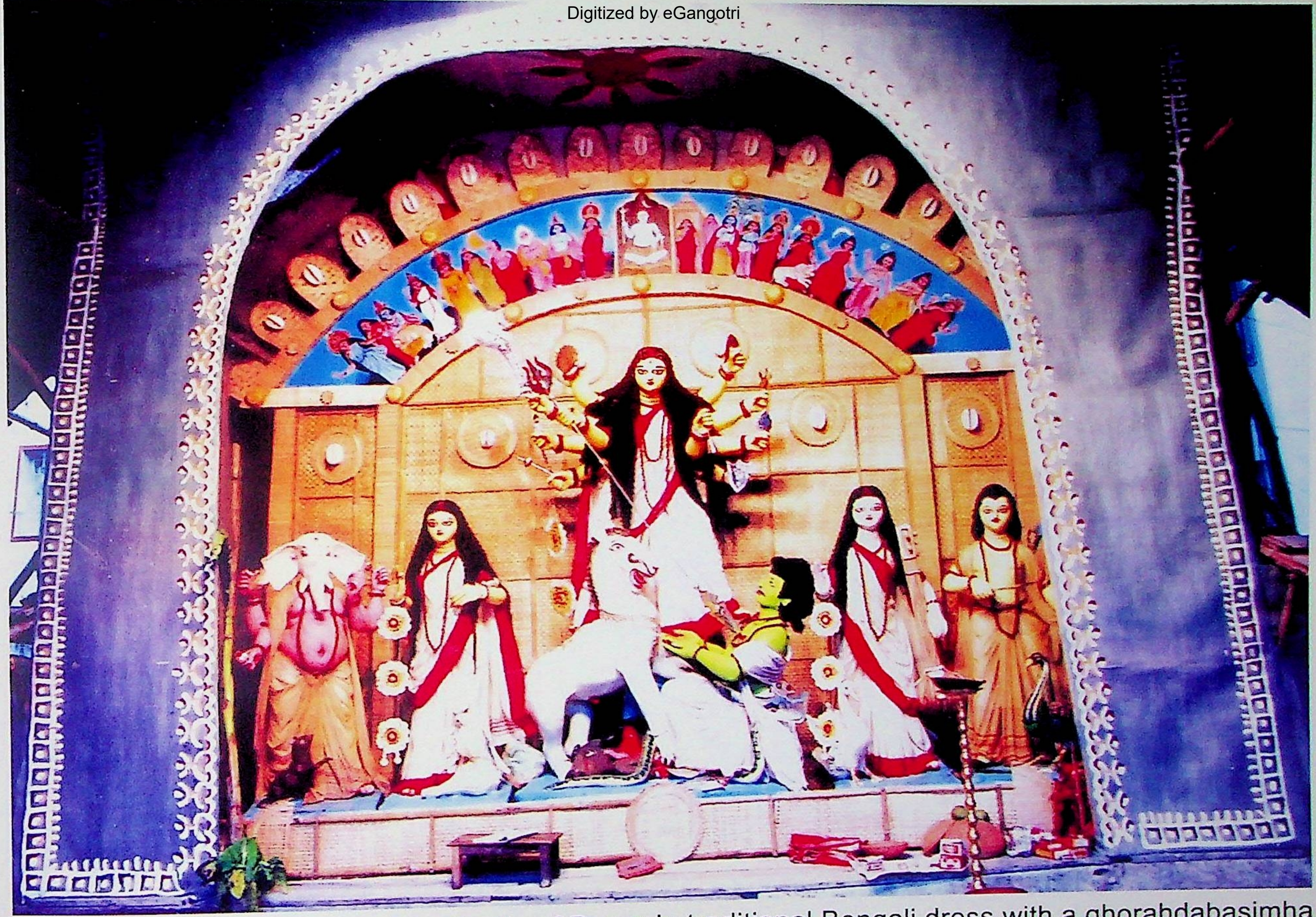
Devi adorned with jute ornaments



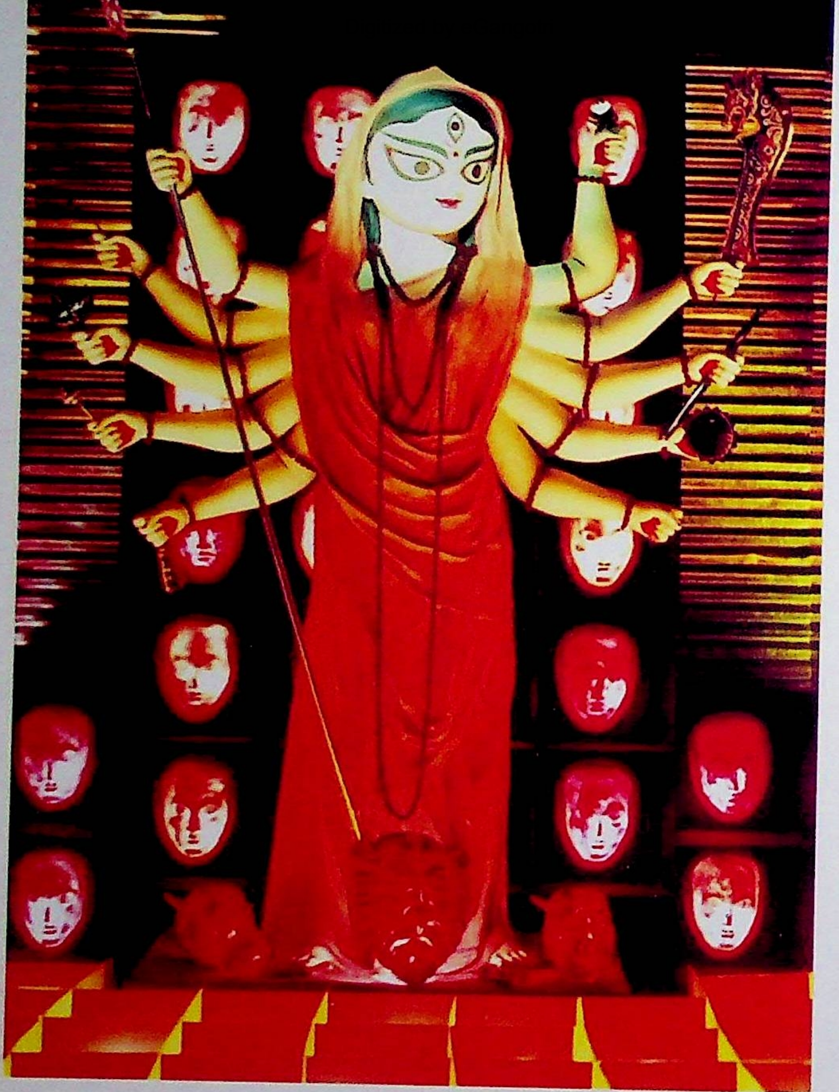
Ma Durga crushing the demon with her trident.



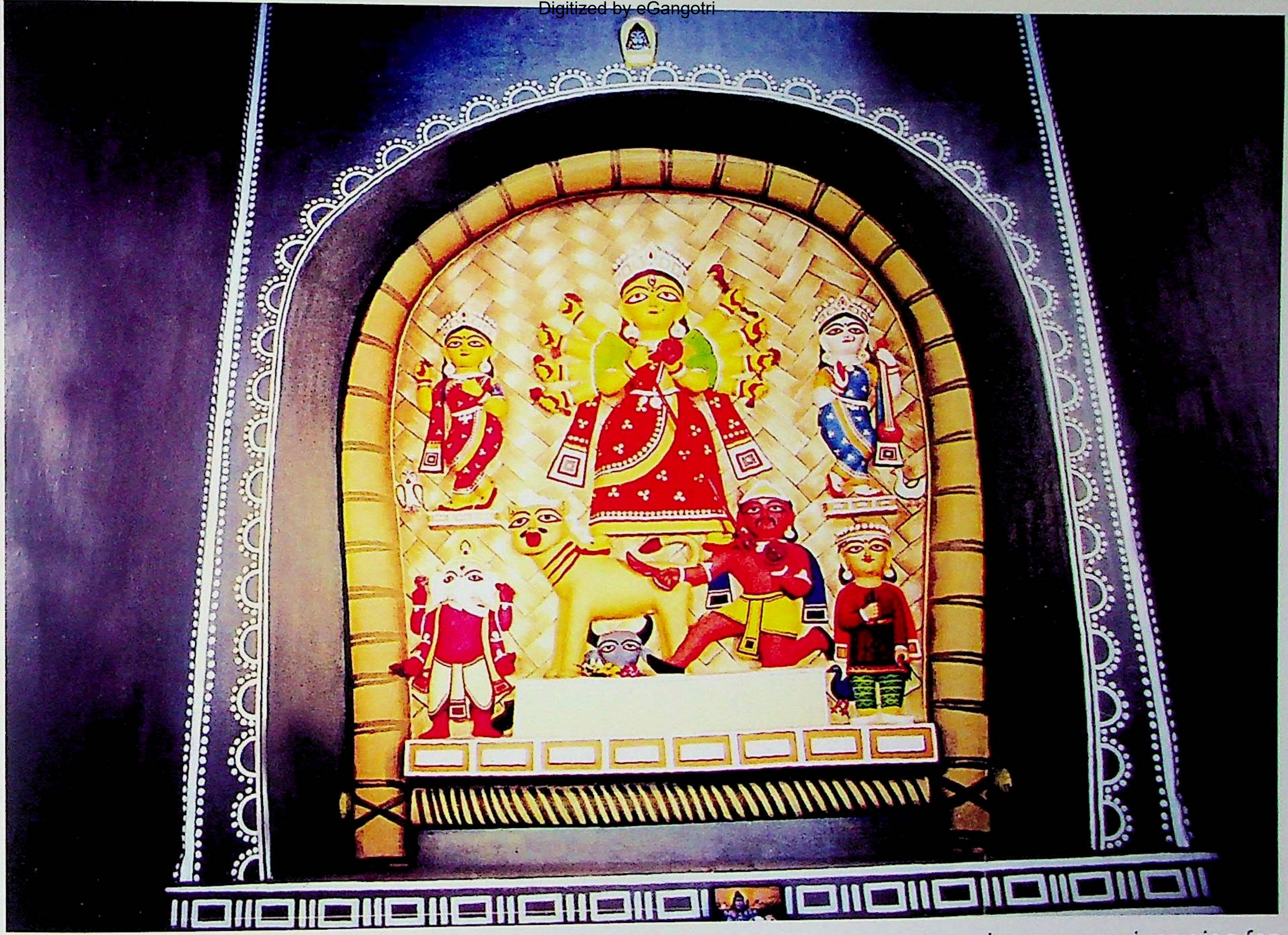
Clay Images given a metallic effect



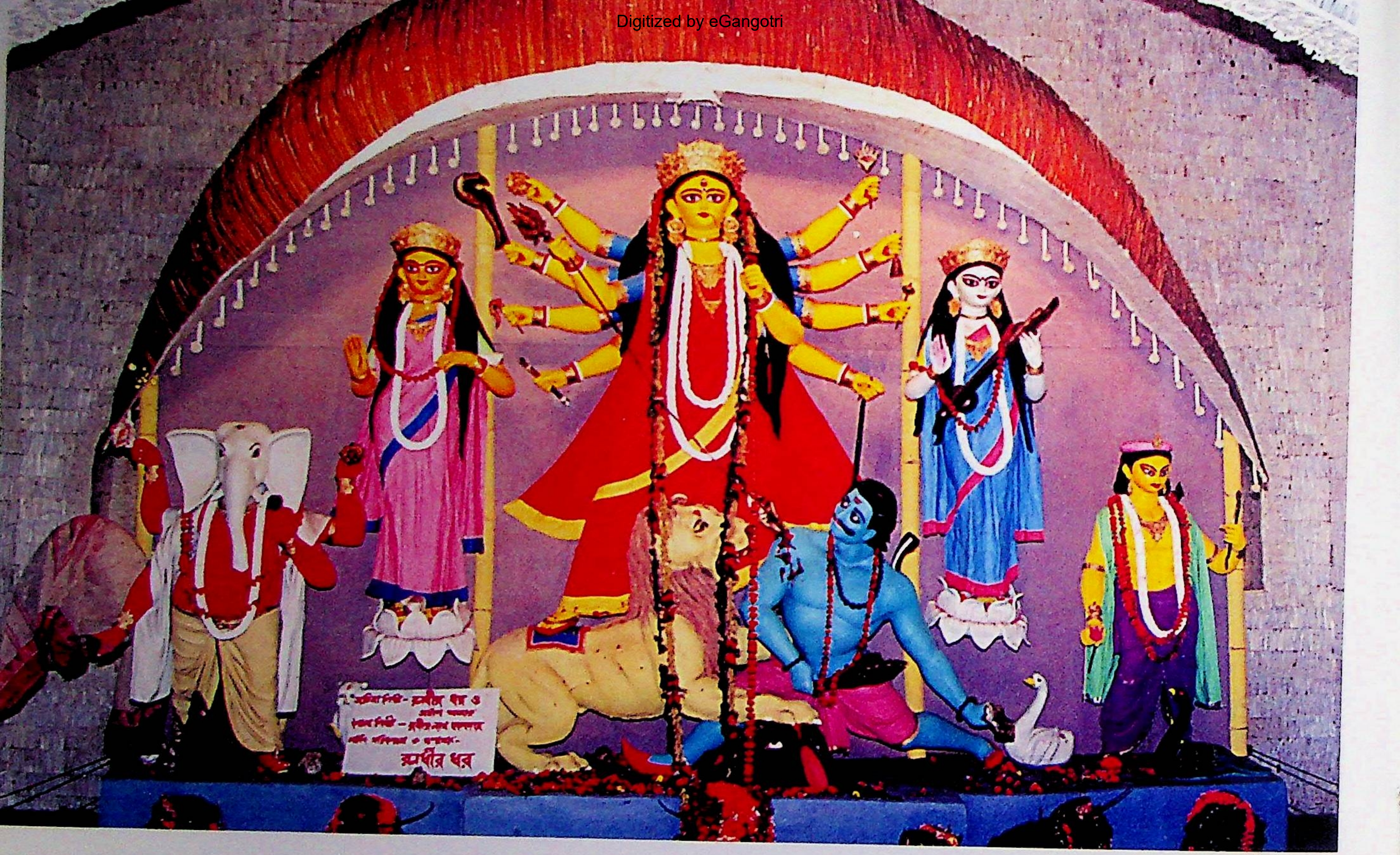
The family of Durga in traditional Bengali dress with a ghorahdabasimha



Devi as Yogini



Icons on a winnowing fan



Devi inside a decorated thatched hut

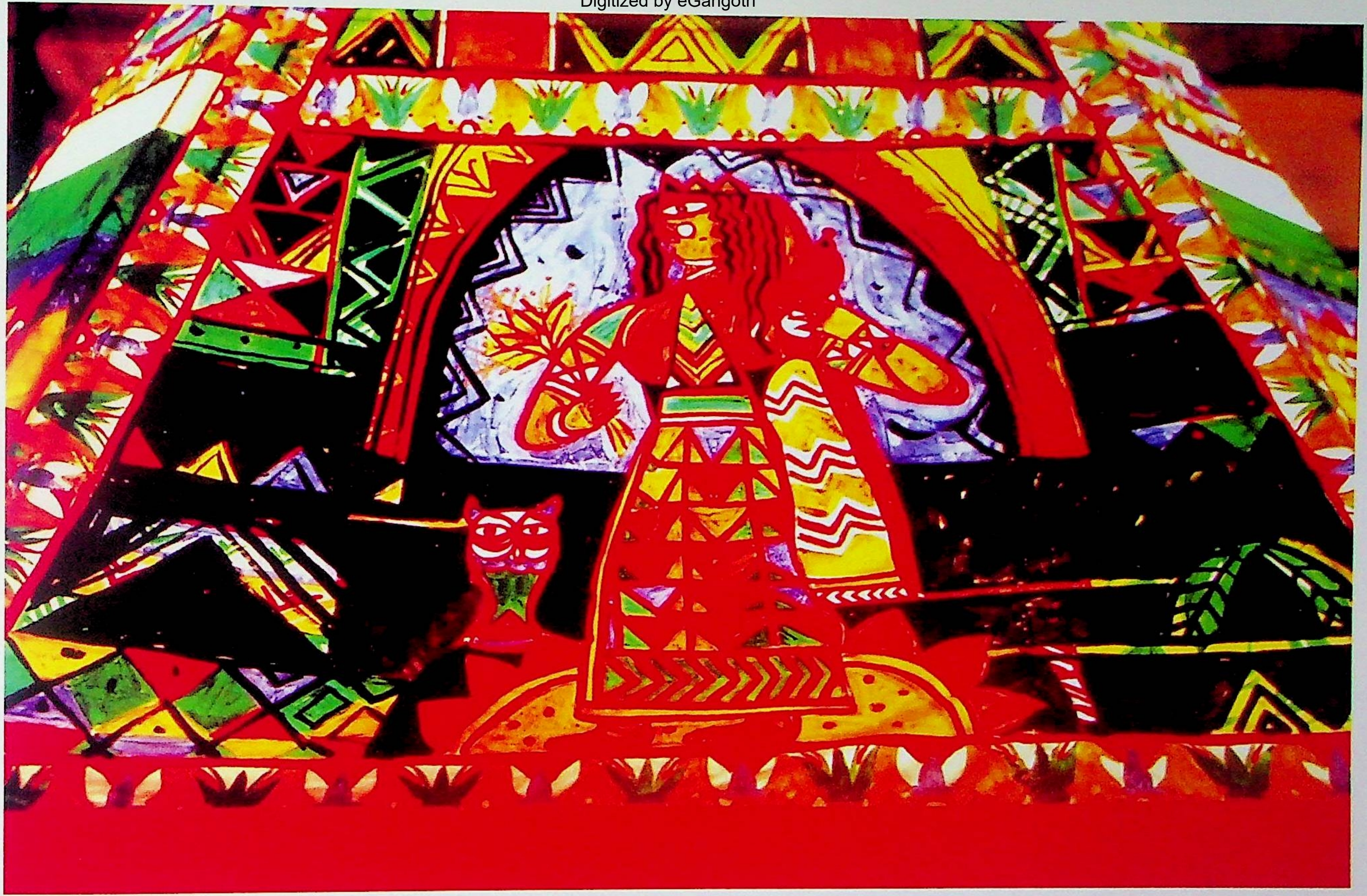
Fascinating faces of festivity

A purity of white on a white marble dish

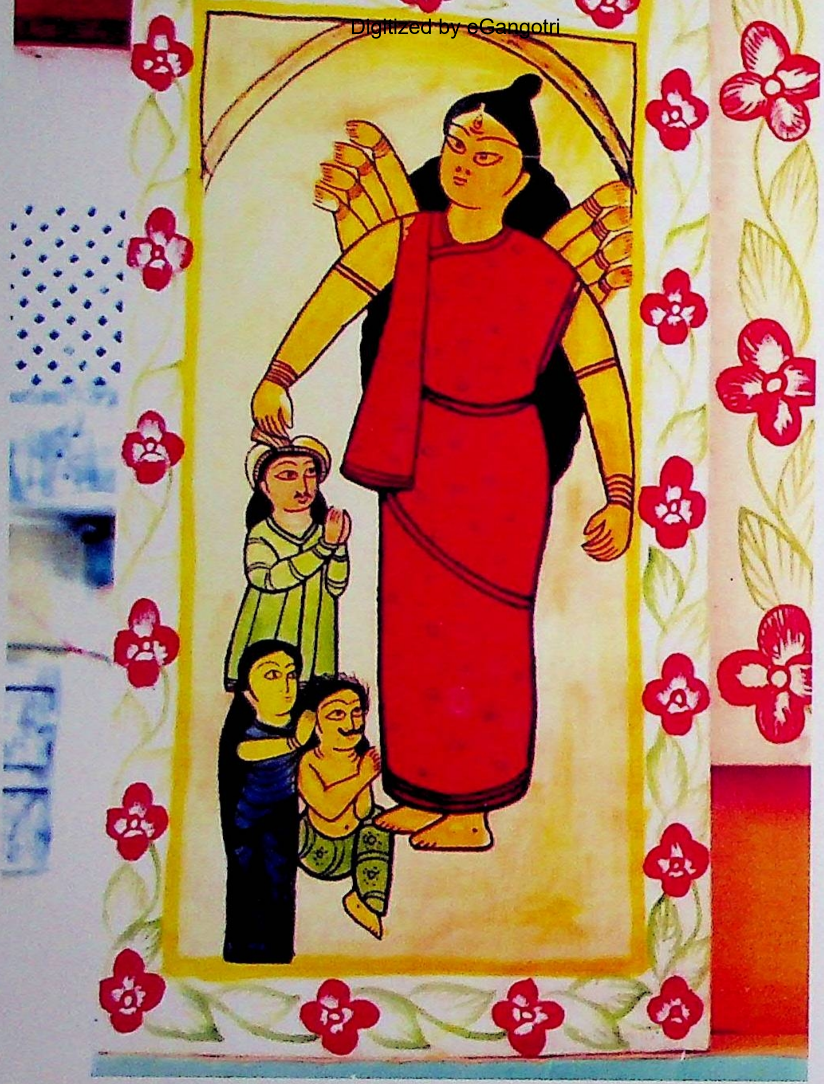
The tribute of flowers: shiuli and dopati

The rangoli of colours surround her image

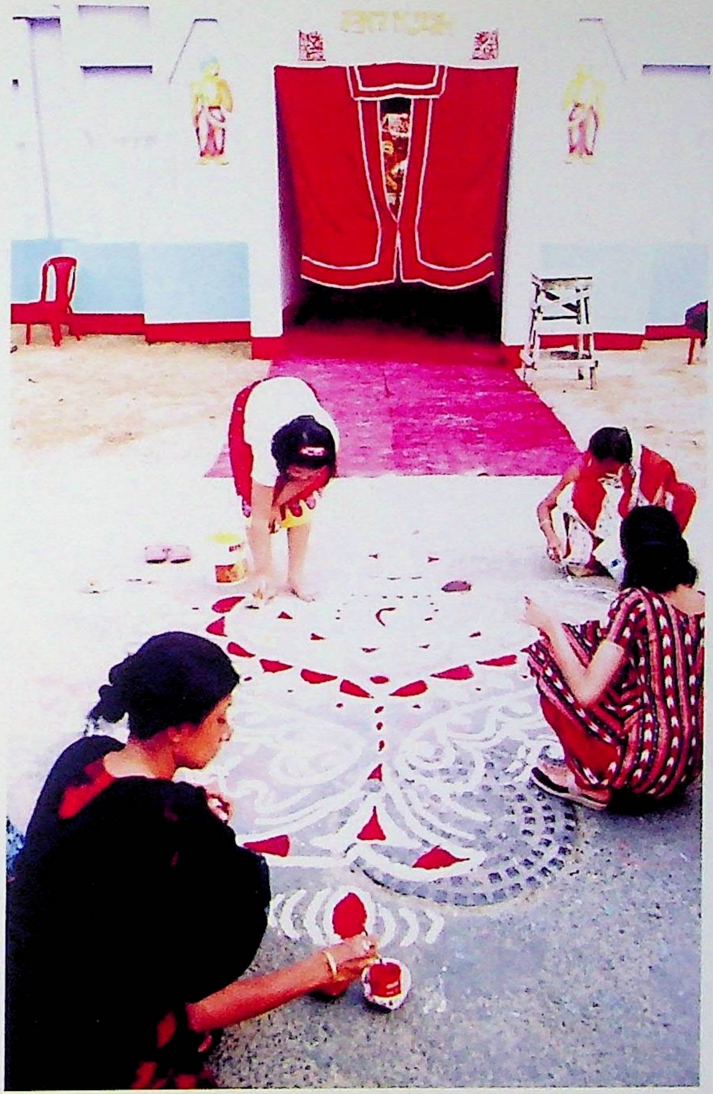
An architectural splendor



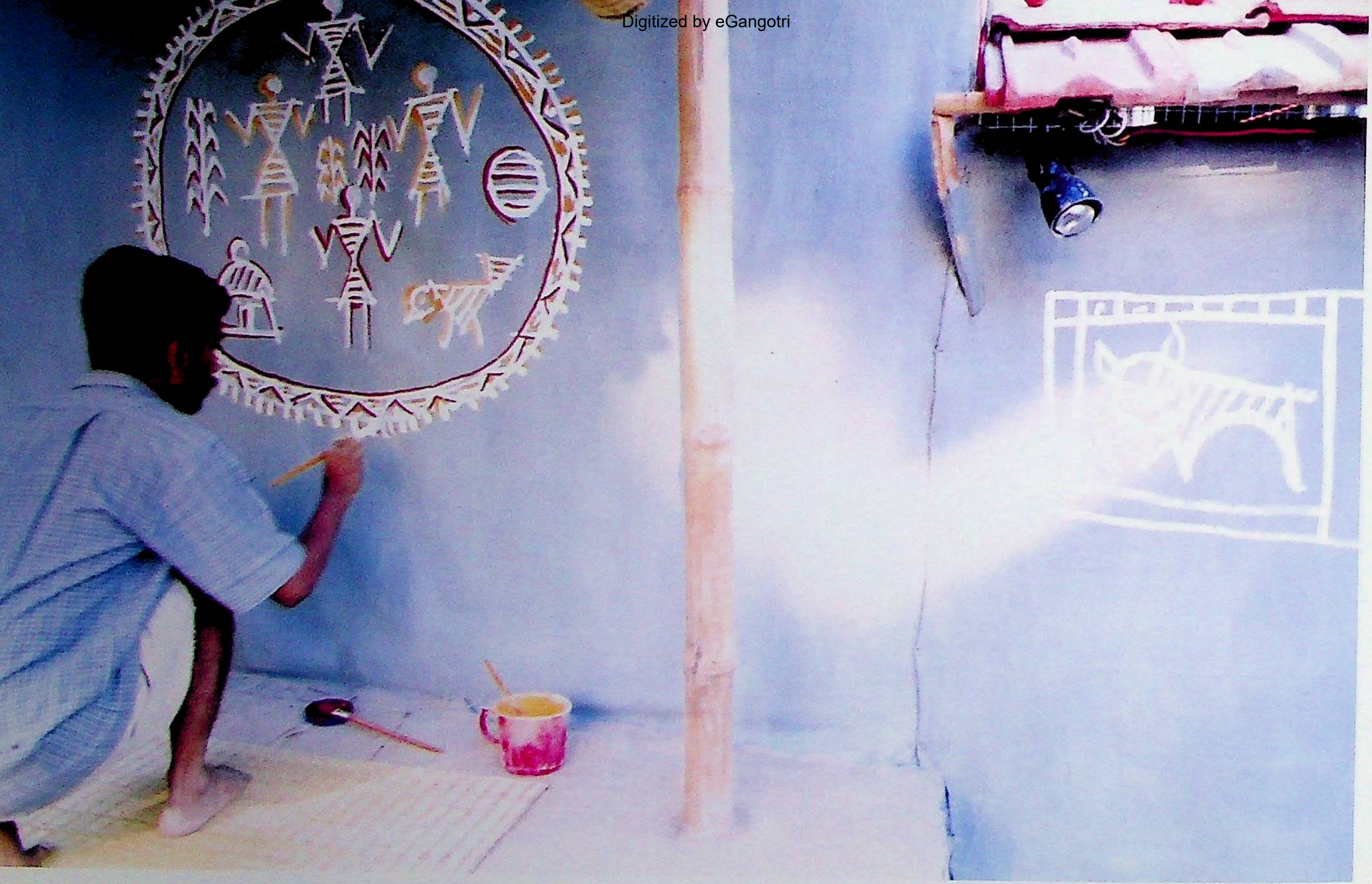
The painted goddess, a fusion of abstract and folk art



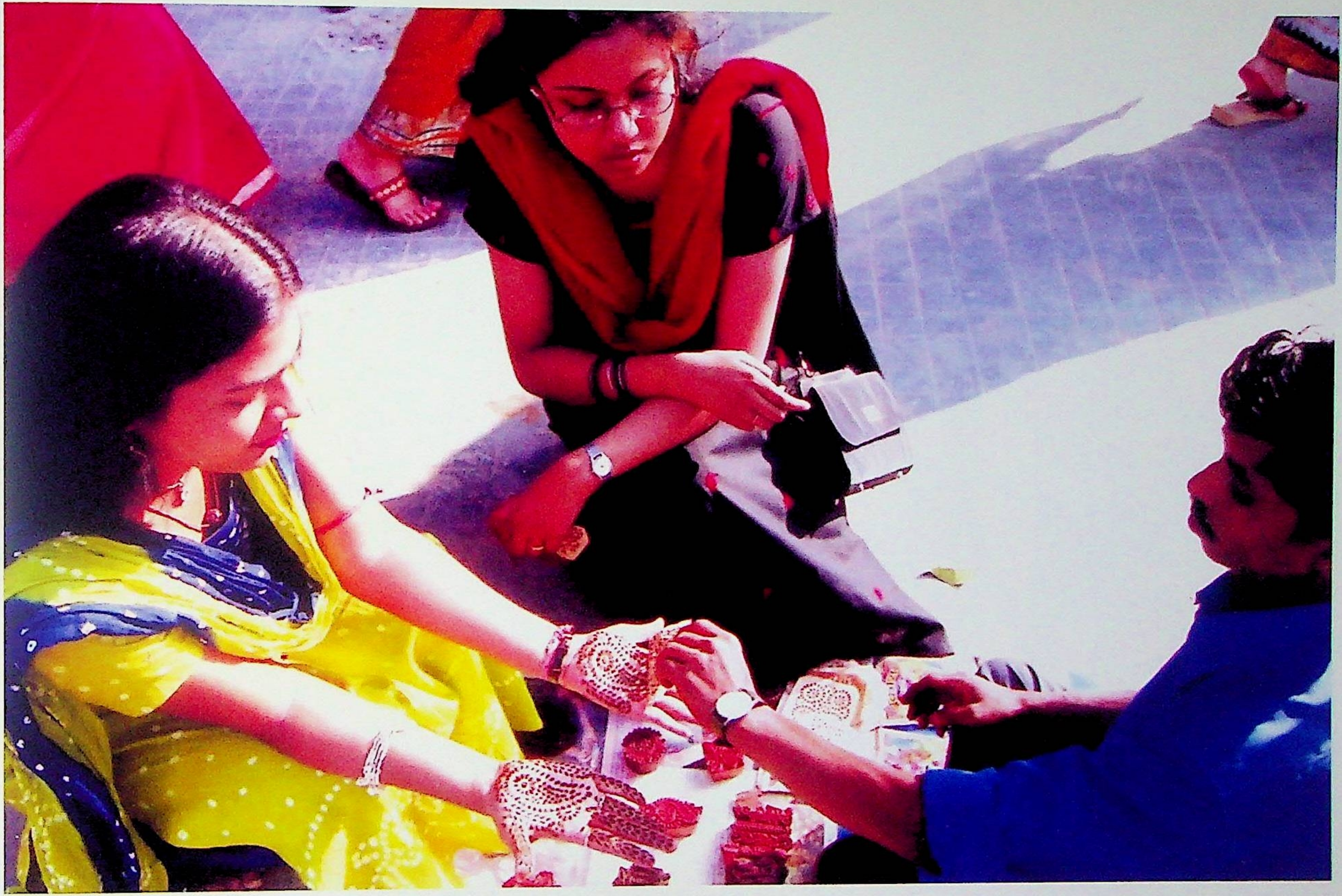
Devi in the image of Ramachandra: an impression of the pata painter



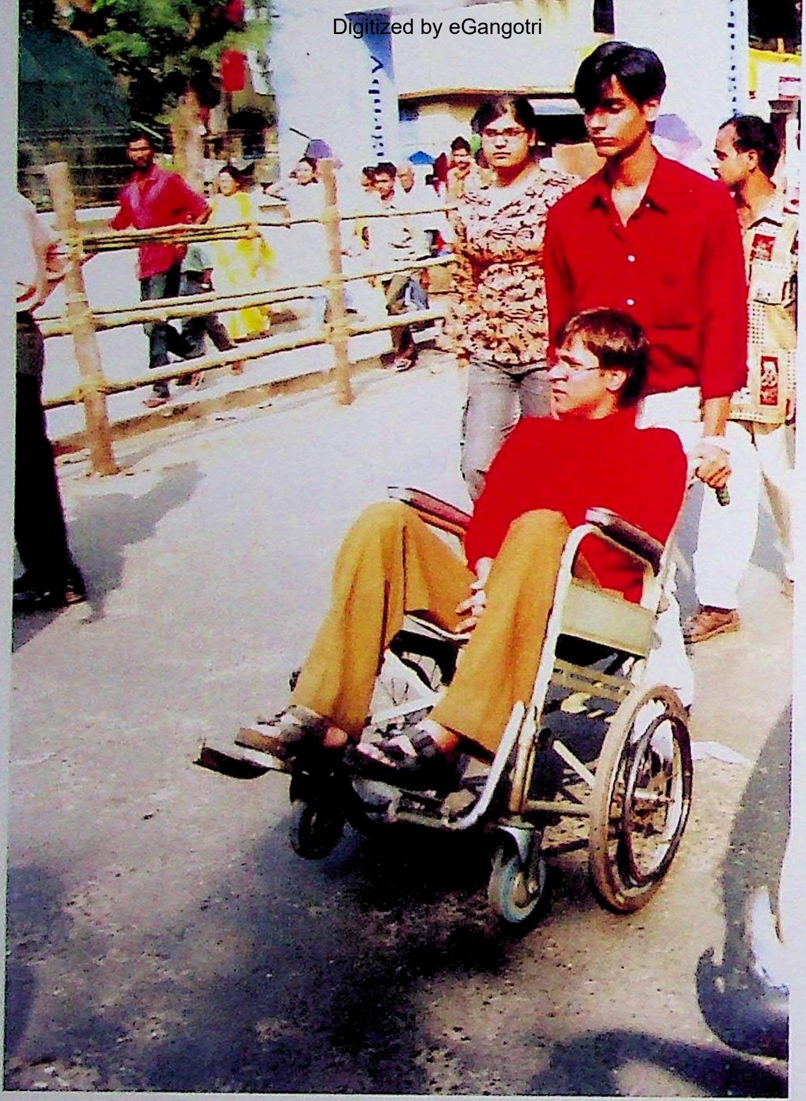
Alpana decoration on the floor by women-folk



Decorating the walls to invite Devi



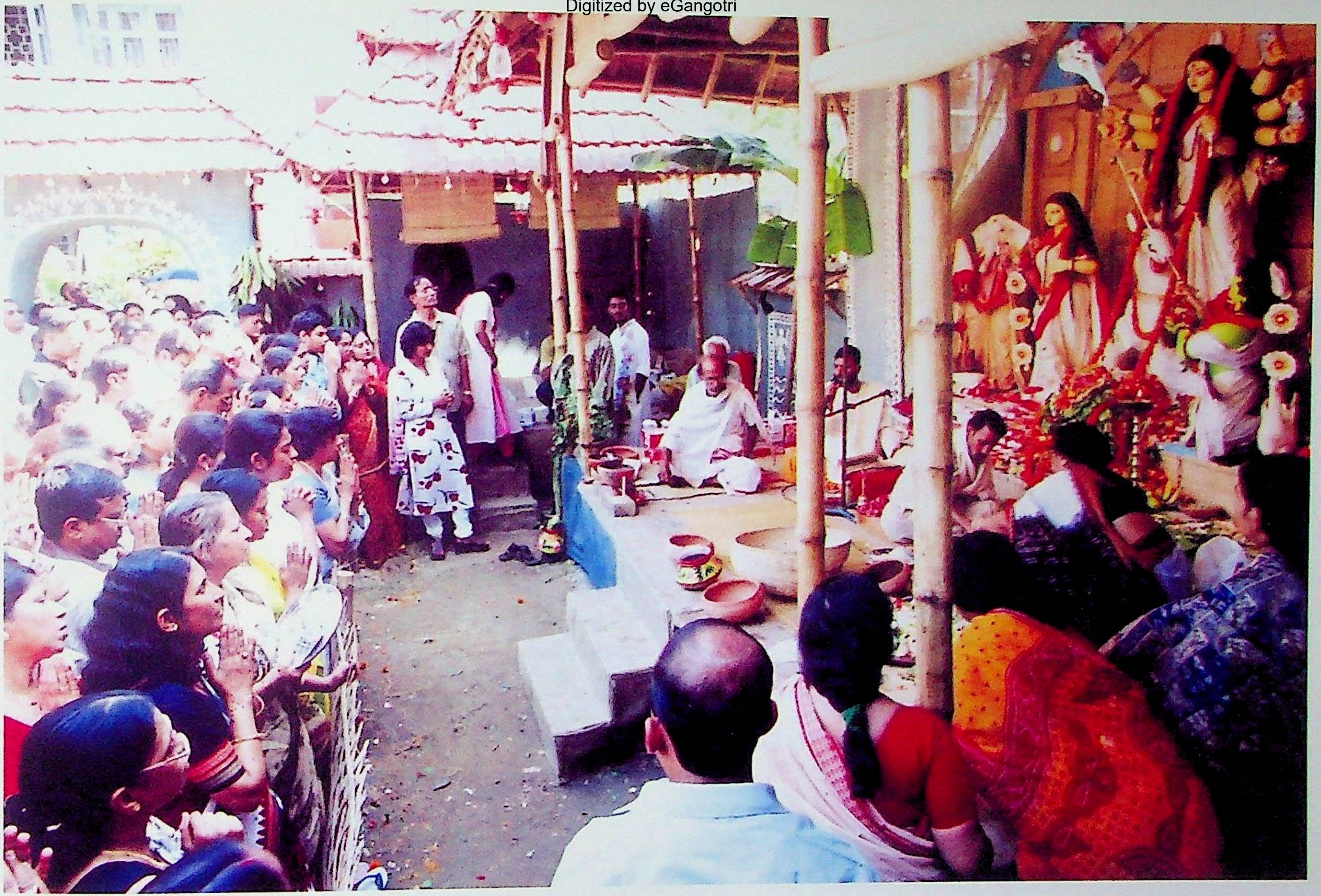
Mehandi decoration on the hand by women-folk



In search of images: where there is will there are wheels

The fun of puja: a moment of laughter, everything after

The folded hands generate devotion

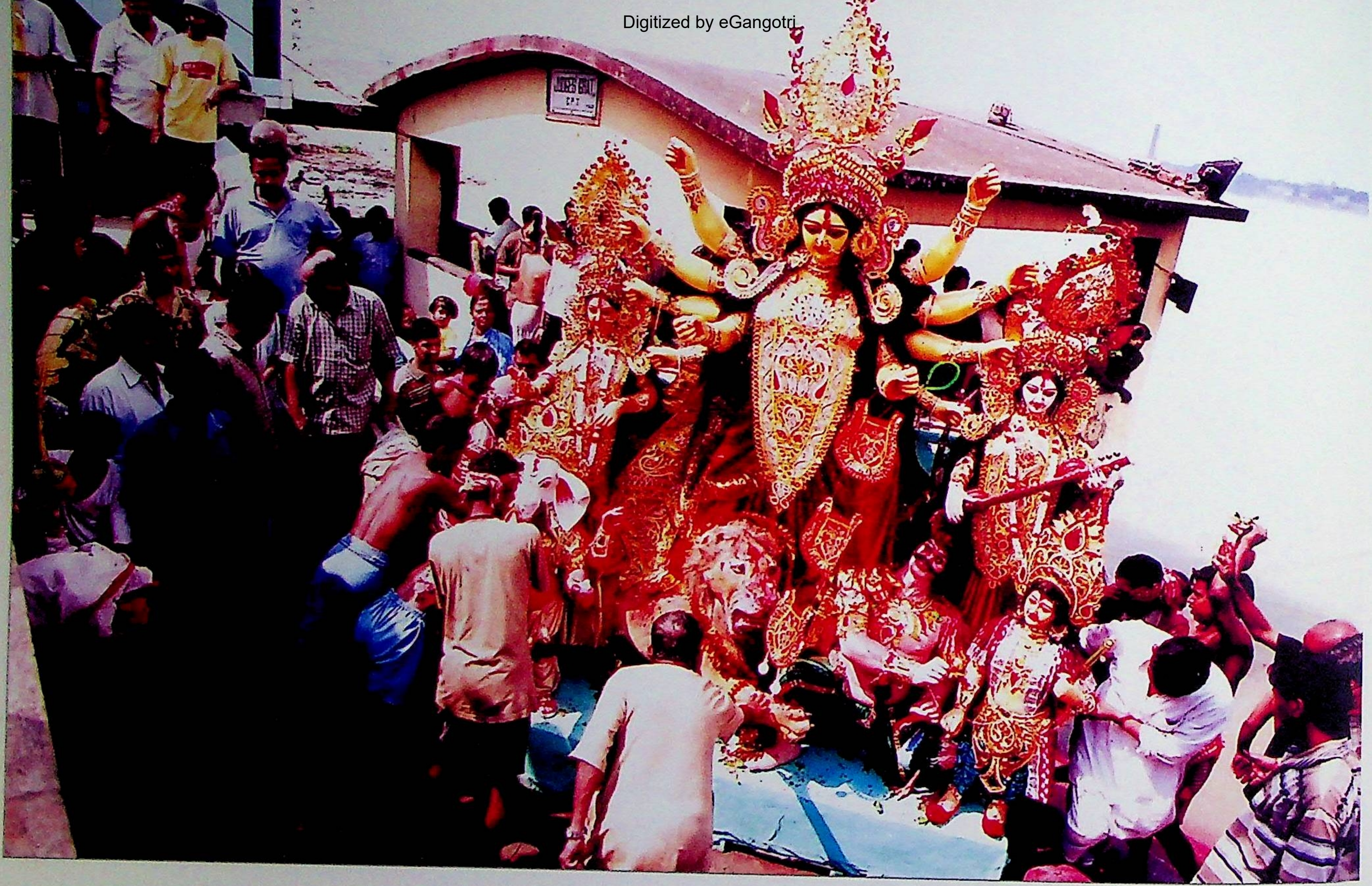


The priest recites and devotees follow suit

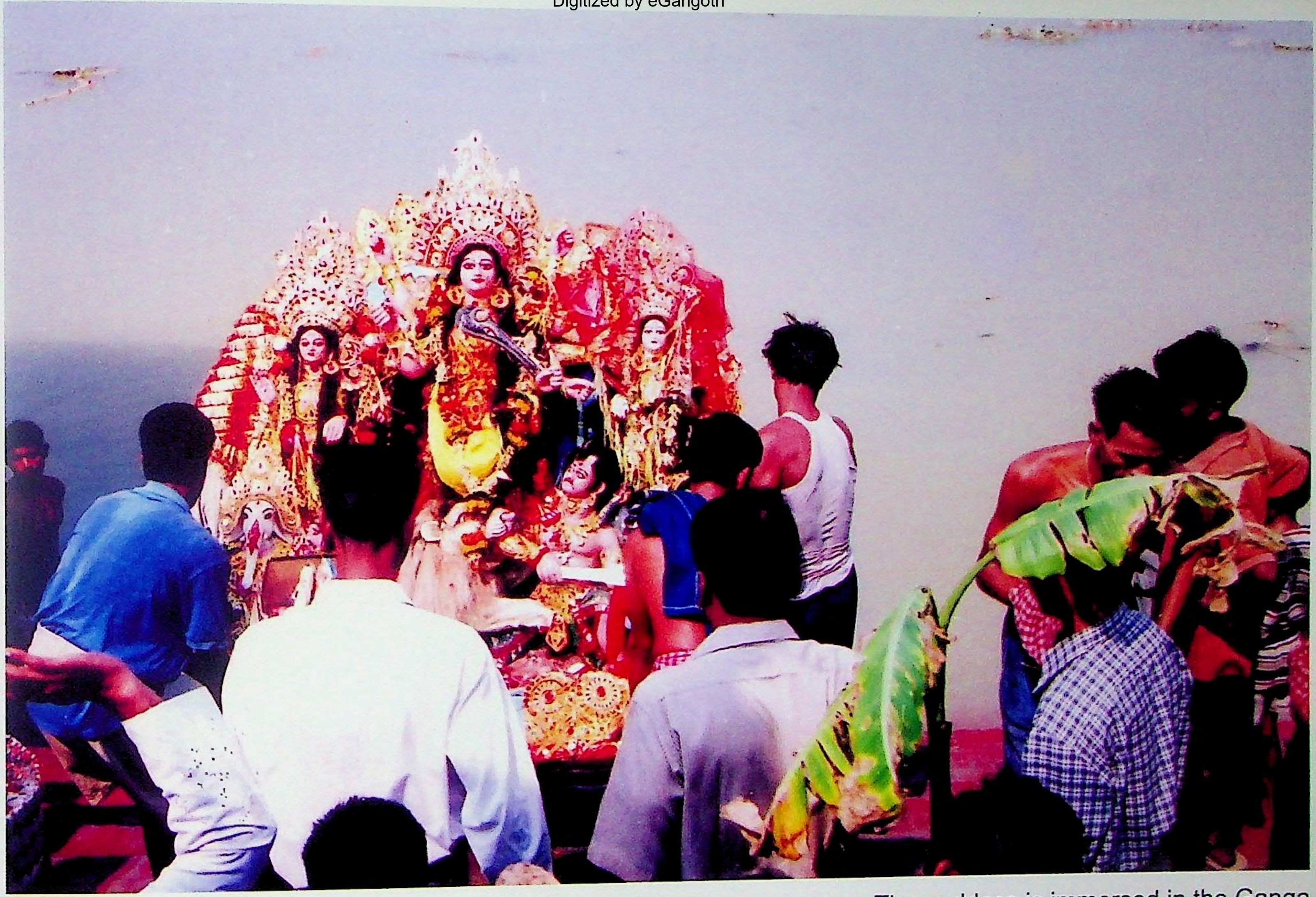
Women bids adieu to goddess putting vermilion (sindur) on her forehead

Oh ! Mother come again

Her face reflects in the oil lamp



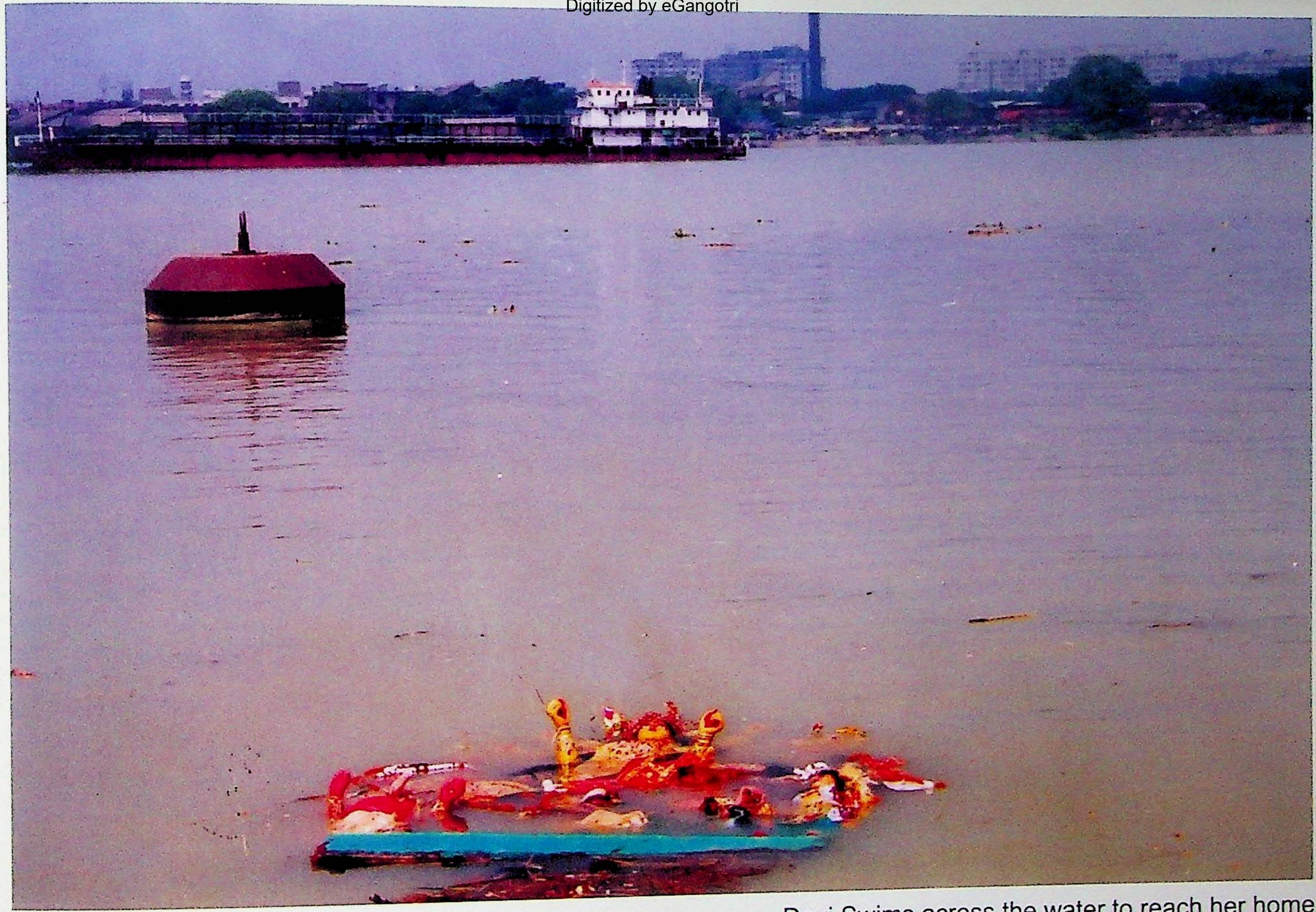
Performing rituals before immersion



The goddess is immersed in the Ganga

GANGA WA
গঙ্গা দূষণ মু

A last few minutes with Devi



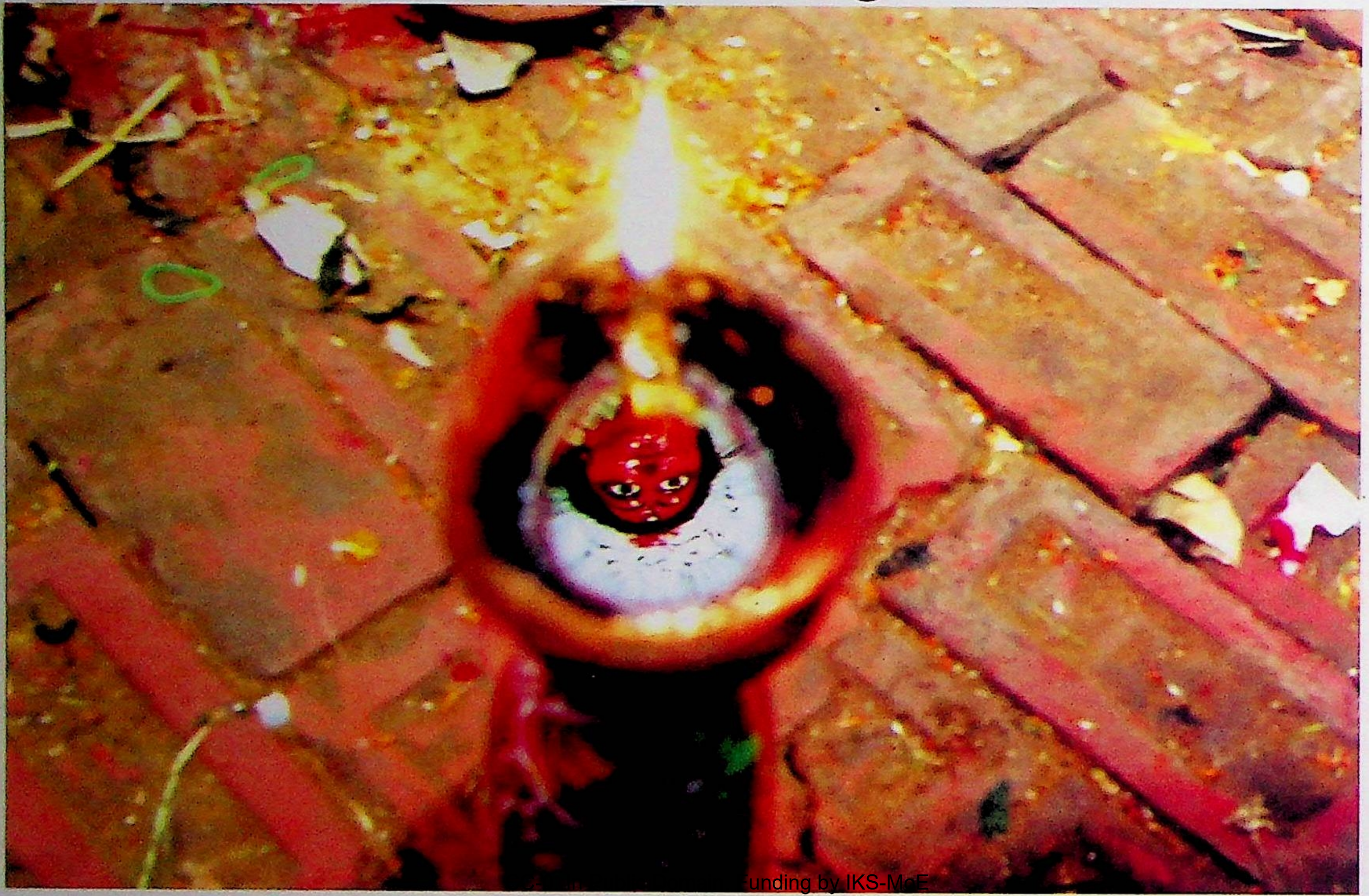
Devi Swims across the water to reach her home

Acknowledgement

Anjan Kumar Mitra
Arun Ganguly
Bhavna and Sanshanka Sen
Dilip and Amita Mitra
Desmond Doig
Gora and Phyllis Aditya
Goutam Ghose
Ghosh Bari's Puja, In Jodhpur Park
Kolkata International Foundation For
Art, Literature and Culture
Kusum Bhandari
Dr. Karuna Mukherjee
Mehata Family of Photovisual
Mihir and Juthika Adittya
Sm Mahua Sarkar
Sm Menoka Dutt
Sm Manjula Dutt
Sm Papiya Dutta
Dr. Pradip Dutta
Rajiva Sinha
Srigopal Dutt
Subho Dasgupta
Sukdeb Moullick
Dr. Sekhar Nath Basu
Various Puja Organisers of Kolkata

A Fascinating Festivity

Durga Puja



ography